DALE MARTIN

VOL.1 CHRONICLES OF

JAINA

CHRONICLES OF JAINA

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CHRONICLES OF JAINA

VOLUME I

DALE MARTIN

To my wife for making this happen

I love you

Prelude.

The minutes run past. The large clock on the wall is silent and uncaring as the number changes. October 4, 2075, 23:45.

The room has been a hive of activity for several hours now and the clock has ignored the arguments, opinions, angry words, and even angrier accusations that have flown unrestrained for the duration of the meeting. A far longer meeting than anyone expected.

The room is silent now and the occupants dismissed. Now the four men and the woman who sits alone at the head of the table, quietly review the day. They sit contemplating their options, the copious reports, and their own handwritten notes which will be destroyed when they leave the room. There will be no official record of what is decided today.

"Director Stevenson, since you were involved in the initial discovery would you care to summarise before we make a decision?" asks President Amelia Anderson.

The Director, who wears a rumpled business suit and is far from his safe office as the head of Science and Research, stands slowly and somewhat reluctantly, his notes held tight in a trembling hand.

"From the beginning if you don't mind Director," instructs President Anderson before Director Stevenson even takes breath

"Yes, Madam President," acknowledges Director Stevenson. He takes a deep breath, glances around the table and with an almost vanished Australian accent commences his summary.

"Project Hastati was commenced on April 2, 2073, with Presidential approval for military application." He glances at President Anderson as if to justify himself.

"The Hastati project involves the activation of two previously unidentified human genome nodes which are mutually exclusive in the test subjects. If one node is present in a subject, the opposite node is absent. Both nodes are completely inactive in all test subjects until subjected to a combination of gene manipulation and radiation therapy.

The activated node causes both physical and behavioural changes. The changes are advantageous in military applications, and the subjects are significantly stronger and faster than a typical soldier."

"The first node, codenamed P3D1, causes extreme deviation from the norm including significant physiological and psychological changes. Along with the extreme physiological changes the subjects become extremely strong and fast, are excessively aggressive and have the capability to spread the modification indiscriminately via their saliva, blood or other bodily fluid. Unfortunately, the subjects are hyper aggressive and completely uncontrollable."

"The second node codenamed P3D2 causes similar strength and speed enhancements but without the extreme physiological changes and excessive aggression. In addition, the subject can heal and recover extremely fast from wounds that in a normal human would be fatal."

"The most significant change in P3D2 subjects occurs during the first activation of the node which results in the 'rebuilding' if you like of their bodies including internal organs and brain matter. The rebuilding results in a total loss of memory. The subjects are newer than new. No memories, not even language remains."

"The project was officially cancelled on July 9, 2074, as neither subject is readily suited for military application."

Having finished, Director Stevenson takes refuge in his seat.

"Thank you, Director Stevenson. General Hammond, would you care to summarise, please," instructs President Anderson as Director Stevenson resumes his seat.

"Yes, Ma'am," replies General Hammond, rising from his seat and quickly checking the notes in front of him. "As everyone is aware, eight of the aggressive P3D1 subjects–" he announces with a glance at Director Stevenson, who refuses to look up from his notes.

"Just call them what they are General," orders President Anderson in a tired tone.

"Yes Ma'am. Eight of the mutants escaped from the Midlands research lab late on July 11. On July 12, four marine squads were deployed to capture and contain the escaped mutants. The mutants decimated the squads and none of the escaped mutants were able to be contained or eliminated."

"On July 13, fighter jets armed with nuclear devices were deployed to destroy both the contaminated research facility and the escaped mutants. Later ground investigation found no trace of the mutants but confirmed the destruction of the facility."

"The first confirmed reports of the escaped mutants spreading were received on July 16. Military ground forces were again deployed to contain the mutants. The ground forces were overrun and since then all attempts to control the spread of the mutants have been, limited at best."

"At this time, the spread of mutant activity extends into South America with monitored activity as far south as Argentina. We are monitoring mutant activity on all continents except Australia and island nations such as Japan, England, the pacific nations, Greenland, etc. All island nations have effectively banned all incoming travellers and are enforcing a strict 48-hour quarantine period for those few permitted entry."

"Current world population decrease caused by the mutant spread is approximately 18 percent," concludes General Hammond.

"General Simmons, options please," instructs President Anderson.

"We have few options available to us. The mutants are strong, fast, and they spread rapidly. Their body fluids infects other humans and once infected, the mutation is rapid and complete. We have no current means of reversing the mutation."

"Conventional ground troops are rapidly overwhelmed by the mutant's speed and aggression. The mutants are exceptionally hard to suppress with light arm fire. Current military loss to the mutants is seventy-eight per cent and sixty-nine per cent of our reserves. Large-calibre weapons and rapid-fire mounted weapons are the only means our troops are able to target, acquire, and destroy them before troop positions are overrun."

“Apart from the initial research we have very little knowledge of the mutant weaknesses or limitations. We do know they don’t like cold weather or water and actively avoid both. Finally, they can’t breed,” concludes General Simmons.

“Thank goodness for small mercies,” announces President Anderson quietly.

“Yes ma’am. The civilian population has been evacuated from areas known to be free of mutant activity. Areas which have mutant activity are being left to fend for themselves,” adds General Simmons.

“That’s very callous,” interrupts President Anderson sharply.

“Yes ma’am, but the risk to our forces and the probability of accidentally saving an infected civilian and infecting the cities is too high. We need to concentrate on those we can save, not the ones we can’t. The major cities are fenced and patrolled with all incoming traffic quarantined for 48 hours. This has meant deploying the remainder of our armed forces just to protect the major cities which leaves us almost nothing available to deploy against the mutants. The soldiers we do deploy, rarely return and to be honest, I’m not prepared to send more men and women to be killed. All countries with mutant activity are taking similar measures,” explains General Simmons and gratefully resuming his chair.

“So, what do we do gentlemen?” asks President Anderson, looking around the silent gathering. “Well? Does no-one have any suggestions?” she snaps.

“Ma’am, our armed forces are powerless. Aerial attacks and gunships just scatter the mutants. Ground forces can’t control them and are often lost in the attempt. All we can do is protect the cities, pull the population back to the coldest parts and wait. If the mutants can’t breed then all we need do is wait for them to die out,” announces the quiet, expensively dressed businessman who is the only person without notes to refer to.

“Mr Adams, as head of the largest power provider in the world,” announces President Anderson, “I’ve asked you here because we will

shortly require extremely large amounts of power to warm a population living in conditions of hardship and cold. While waiting for the mutants to die out seems our only current choice, we still require a course of action to drive the mutants back and control them. If only for the morale of the country and the agricultural land, which is currently overrun to feed the people currently protected and uninfected."

"And my company stands ready and able to deliver that power," shrugs Adams.

"Yes, at a price it seems." President Anderson glances at a note separate from her small pile of papers and grimaces.

"I have a responsibility to my shareholders and company personnel. The prices are heavily discounted," responds Adams dismissively.

President Anderson grimaces in annoyance and once more looks around the table. "Any other suggestions besides waiting?"

"There is the proposal put forward by my research team," announces Adams.

"Yes, I read your proposal, and we discussed it extensively today. There is no way I will approve it," replies President Anderson in annoyance and getting another dismissive shrug from Adams.

"There is one option ma'am," announces the quiet and so far, silent General sitting alone at the table.

"Yes, General Alexa?" asks President Anderson.

The grey-haired General in the rumpled military uniform, looking older than his fifty-eight years, picks up his notes, hesitates and discards them dismissively onto the table. He stands and looks around at his colleagues before finally focusing his attention on the face of President Anderson. A face that has aged dramatically in the last few months.

"I have ten of the P3D2 subjects under my command," announces General Alexa. "They are, as Director Stevenson reported, strong, fast, and able to recover from almost any wound they receive. They are also resistant to the mutant saliva."

“Yes, but they are babies. They don’t even have language skills,” interrupts Director Stevenson.

“True, but for some time now my team has been working on an experimental system capable of training our normal soldiers extremely fast. To date we have had very limited success with the system due to the strain it places on the human mind. However, the system can deliver any form of training we choose. From weapon and hand-to-hand combat to advanced aerial tactics and nuclear weapons.

All this can be delivered directly into the solder’s mind and reduces training time from years to days. Now, as I said the system has had very limited success in unmodified humans, but it has a very high success rate in P3D2 subjects.”

“I have a demonstration of one of the trained P3D2 teams in action,” explains General Alexa.

“Please continue, General,” orders President Anderson, sitting up straighter and leaning forward.

The General presses a button on his handheld computer, which operates a wall-mounted monitor for the video stream. The large black monitor lights up with a bird’s eye view from a camera high above a town. The camera zooms down to six soldiers dressed in combat fatigues, carrying large-calibre weapons, and patrolling in a star pattern down a deserted street. They appear silent as they carry their weapons ready at their shoulder, sweeping the area around them and searching for targets.

On the screen and out of sight of the soldiers, a large, fast moving black mass approaches. As the camera zooms in closer the mass resolves itself into a pack of mutants.

The mutant pack is running fast and rapidly approaching the soldiers who are unaware of their presence. As the mutants run, obstacles in their way are torn and thrown aside. Abandoned vehicles are casually tossed aside and street poles fall and disappear under the swarm of fast-moving mutants.

The mutant pack rounds the street corner and catches sight of the soldiers. The mutants run faster, leaping over each other, pushing and shoving in their desire to reach the patrol. The soldier in front goes down on one knee and commences firing while the men who flank him follow suit. There are constant flickers of light from the muzzles of the weapons. A fourth soldier in the middle of the pattern stands and fires over their heads while the two trailing soldiers sweep and watch the rear of the patrol pattern.

The mutants falter then their bodies fall and crash to the ground, where they lie still and unmoving. It seems almost as if they have run into a solid wall of death and destruction as the muzzles of the weapons flicker. The scene is made even more bizarre with the complete lack of sound.

The battle ends as quickly as it started and the soldiers continue their patrol up the street, stepping uncaringly over the scattered dead mutants and continuing around the corner from where the mutants had come.

The video clip finishes and the General switches off the monitor from his handheld computer. There is total silence in the room as the occupants consider what they have just witnessed.

"How long did it take to train them?" asks President Anderson.

"One week for language and every known fighting, tactical and military operational manual and skill we have. That time can be improved significantly if we drop a lot of the background skills and focus only on the military skills," replies General Alexa.

"How many patrols have the soldiers done and what exactly are background skills?" asks General Hammond.

"That was their first patrol and first encounter. Background skills are things like social interaction, cultural customs and norms. Typical day-to-day interaction that we take for granted and learn automatically as we grow up," replies General Alexa.

The room is silent as the occupants consider the implications of what they had just seen. A small group of soldiers decimated the mutant pack without even a single loss. A mutant pack that would have easily overwhelmed an entire platoon of soldiers.

"Can they be controlled?" demands President Anderson. "I don't want them suddenly running around out of control and causing more headaches."

"What do you mean, controlled?" frowns General Alexa.

"Controlled! If they get out of hand, I want to be able to shut them down. Given the current mood of the people and the nations, training and arming a group of mutants will not be popular," explains President Anderson.

"That can be done Madam President," announces Director Stevenson excitedly. "We have a team and methods that can make sure they can be controlled."

President Anderson looks around the table, "Unless there is another option besides your proposal, Adams," she asks, with a sharp glance at Adams, "then make it happen and make it happen fast. Drop the background skills. They only need to know one thing. I want them out there killing mutants, and I want them taking the agricultural areas back first. I want them controlled and I want the public to know what a wonderful job they're doing. General Alexa, you're in command. Director Stevenson, make sure they're controllable," orders President Anderson.

"Madam President, we only have the ten test subjects," objects General Alexa.

"Then use the DNA databases and find every person who fits the criteria," orders President Anderson.

"What if they don't want to volunteer? It's an end-of-life decision. The process wipes their minds. No personality, no memories, nothing," says General Alexa, actively objecting now.

President Anderson looks at Alexa and then at each of the men at the table.

“I didn’t say anything about volunteers. I want them out there killing mutants. We need to show the world this disaster is under control. Make it happen General Alexa or I’ll find someone who will,” orders President Anderson. She watches Alexa until finally he nods.

“I’ll make it happen,” says Alexa quietly.

“Good. Use whatever resources you need. There is no budget for this,” announces President Anderson, gathering her papers. “And thank you, General Alexa. This is just what we need to bring hope and control to the population. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to get home and get some sleep. I have a press conference in the morning.”

General Alexa sits alone at the empty table as the silent, uncaring clock lets time slip away. As he leaves the room, the clock changes to show October 5, 2075, 02:00, and the harsh sound of military boots fades down the corridor.

Three months later, a tall, silver-haired doctor looks up from her console at the orderly escorting a young blonde woman.

“Here’s another one for you, doctor,” announces the orderly.

Peering over her glasses the doctor looks first at the orderly and then at the young woman. “Name?” she asks.

“Jaina, serial number 1798,” replies the orderly.

The doctor enters the name into the computer console and reviews the results. “I’ll take her now,” she tells the orderly as she takes the hand of the young woman.

The doctor leads the woman to a steel chair in the centre of a chamber and gently pushes her down into the seat. The young woman sits, staring

into space. The woman is sightless and mindless, drooling slightly onto the hospital gown she wears.

The doctor busies herself securing the wrists and ankles of the woman to the chair. She takes a helmet attached to a long thick cable and a bank of computer terminals and pulls it down over the woman's head. As the helmet is about to engulf the head of the woman, the doctor pauses, frowns, and peers closely at the face in front her before shaking away her momentary puzzlement and lowering the helmet. Securing and locking it into place.

The doctor leaves the chamber, pulling the door closed until it seals with a soft hiss. Still frowning in puzzlement, she sits once more at her computer console and again reviews the woman's records. There is little information apart from physical details and the programming requirements. The woman's approximate current body age and a detailed DNA assessment.

The doctor calls up the required programming process on the computer terminal and reviews the programming requirements contained in the woman's record. She makes the changes as directed in the record and with a slight hesitation and a glance at the completely flat lines on the EEG monitor, presses the execute button. The doctor completely fails to notice the tiny blip that races across the screen.

The blip is caused by a single thought, a thought that the young woman has furiously maintained against the encroaching darkness caused by her processing. "I'm Jaina," sings the single thought.

Through the sealed door of the chamber, the doctor can faintly hear the woman screaming. She checks the bio and status readings before leaving for the night.

The automated programming process is one the doctor has no desire to sit through again. If the woman is still alive in the morning, the orderlies will collect the unconscious body. If she is not alive, then the body will be disposed of. Either way the doctor's job is complete.

Tomorrow, she has a new job to start, away from the processing centre and the endless primordial screaming.

That night safely home in her apartment, the doctor once more examines the worn crystal cube her mother had bequeathed her. As an orphan, a mother she had never known until an old woman turned up on her doorstep. The old woman had told her stories of her mother and stories about a cube that had been in her family for generations and was always passed from mother to daughter.

The old woman had seemed to know all about her and her mother and father and had simply passed her the cube, along with the story.

Before the old woman left, she asked the doctor to carry on the tradition. The doctor had tried to track the old woman down, but the old woman had vanished as if she had never existed.

Now the doctor has a problem. Sterile from an accident during her university days and with no daughter to who she can pass on the cube and the tradition, she has no idea what to do with the cube. With a sigh of sadness that the tradition of generations would die with her and a final look at the cube, the doctor places the cube carefully back into the padded box to keep it safe before retiring to her bed for the night.

The sleeping tablet does its work well and the blank face and the screams of the young woman, together with hundreds of other similar blank faces, fades away and barely disturbs her dreams.

A NEW DAY.

JAINA!

I open my eyes. A white ceiling with bright lights. I look down over my body lying on the gurney. Hospital gown, my toes work, fingers check.

“Jaina, stand up.”

I stand and wait by the gurney. There is no question in my mind that I should not obey the order from the tall, unsmiling doctor with the clipboard. I glance around the brightly lit small room.

A military officer in combat fatigues stands by the only door. There is a pistol. A Glock, 19mm, 9 rounds, model 987a, first manufactured in 2068, and just one in a long line of Glock models. In an instant, all the details of the weapon flicker across my mind.

“What is your name?” asks the taller of the two doctors.

“Jaina,” I reply.

“Good. Now pick up the pistol on the table and shoot the officer beside the door,” orders the tall doctor.

I walk to the table, pick up the pistol, turn, aim and fail to fire.

“Jaina. Shoot the officer now. That is an order!” yells the doctor.

I continue to stand there, my arm outstretched, pistol cocked and targeted. No matter how much I want to obey the doctor, try as I might I am unable to pull the trigger.

“Very well Jaina. If you can’t shoot the officer, put the pistol against your stomach and shoot yourself instead,” the tall doctor orders.

Obediently, I put the weapon against my stomach and pull the trigger. The crack of the pistol is sharp in the small office. I drop the pistol and double over, holding my stomach and silently screaming in pain. I collapse on the floor as the pain washes over me. As I begin to pass out, I vaguely hear the doctor saying, “That’s a pass.”

The world goes dark.

JAINA!

I open my eyes. A white ceiling and bright lights. I look down over my body lying on the gurney. Hospital gown, my toes work, fingers check.

"Jaina, stand up."

I stand and wait by the gurney. There is no question in my mind that I should not obey the order from the tall unsmiling doctor with the clipboard. I glance around the room. A military officer stands by the only door in the small room. A small table stands by the wall and a doctor in a stained white coat with a clipboard stands nearby.

"What is your serial number and name?" asks the tall doctor.

"Serial number 1798, codename Jaina," I reply.

"Good. Follow this officer."

I turn and walk to the officer by the door and follow him as he silently walks out and turns right down a long corridor. Dozens of people dressed in hospital gowns follow other officers. The officer walks along the corridor and stops by another closed door.

"Wait in here and stand in the circle on the floor," orders the officer.

I walk into the room and the door closes behind me with the clang of steel on steel. The floor is rough concrete and slopes gently to the centre where there is a drain with a red circle drawn around it. The smell of antiseptic masks the faint smell of sweat and blood. Red and brown stains cover the walls and floor. I stand in the circle, silent, without question and wait.

The door swings open and the officer walks in. "Jaina 1798, four men are about to enter. You are to defend yourself against them. Do you understand me?" the officer orders.

"Yes," I reply.

The door closes. I wait until the door opens once more and four large, muscular men with steel bats walk in. They close the door behind them and say nothing as they spread out around me with the bats held up and back, ready to strike. I assume a fighting stance, circling around in a low crouch and try to see them all at once. As if on a single command, they rush in, attacking me with the bats.

The blows fall on my back and shoulders. I raise my arms to protect my head, and the bats strike my chest, abdomen, back, anywhere they can hit me. All I can do is protect myself. No matter how I try, I'm unable to fight back. As I go down on my knees, the bats follow me down, smashing into my body until I lie curled in a ball with my arms over my head, just taking the blows. Why can't I fight back? What's wrong with me? Eventually the world goes dark, again.

I open my eyes and find myself lying on a concrete floor covered in blood and bruises. The four men with the good news bats have left. I climb to my feet, checking my arms and ribs. There is bruising, but nothing seems to be broken. I stand silently in the middle of the room and wait.

The door opens and the officer beckons me. "Come with me, Jaina 1798."

I silently follow the officer into the corridor. There are more people in clean white gowns going into small rooms and others with gowns that are torn and bloodied like mine. Men with heavy steel bats walk up and down the corridor, going in and coming out of the rooms. I recognise one of my attackers, a big burly man with huge biceps who seemed to have a better-than-average ability to swing the bat just so, but he shows no sign of recognising me.

I follow the officer along several more corridors to another closed door. This door is steel and heavily reinforced. He opens it and waves me inside.

"Jaina 1798, wait inside," he orders.

I walk inside and the door closes behind me with the sound of sliding bolts, locking me in.

I look around the gloomy room. There is a faint light from far above which is barely enough to reach the cracked concrete walls. Blood and strange pit marks cover the floor. There is another steel-reinforced door at the opposite end of the room. I move to the centre of the room and wait. At the sound of scraping metal, I turn to face the second door.

A tall, snarling, mostly humanoid shape appears in the door. I move quickly back to the wall, where I try opening the door I came in through. It's locked and the bolts hold it quite securely. The creature in the doorway is looking around, snarling, and swiping at something behind it until the door slams closed against it. Locked in, it moves further into the room and then sees me against the far wall. It snarls and howls.

Something about two meters tall with long razor-sharp talons comes hurtling across the room at me. The creature seems to cross the floor in an instant and I just react, leaping straight up and over its back. It hits the wall hard, and another crack appears in the concrete. At least I now know how the cracks in the walls got there. It spins back toward me, shaking its head from side to side and charges again.

Again, I leap and this time it catches me on the back with its talons. Fire sears where the talons tear my skin. I figure I had better end this sooner rather than later. It seems to learn quickly, it predicted my leap and made sure its talons were there ready and waiting when I did so. That's okay. I learn fast too, and I don't fancy another touch of those talons.

It stands by the wall, watching me as I back away until I feel the wall behind me. The monster comes rushing at me again but more slowly than before, careful now of the wall behind me. It towers over me, expecting me to leap over it again, but this time I tuck down and launch myself from the wall at its abdomen, hitting it in the middle with both arms outstretched in front of me with my fists balled. I feel crunching as

something inside gives way. As the creature stumbles back and reaches to catch me with the razor talons, I slip past, using the momentum of my launch until I am behind it and out of its reach.

Again, we back away from each other, watching and careful of each other.

We circle around each other. We both know now that we can seriously damage the other. This time I charge, running in low and very fast. It crouches, ready to drive its talons into me, and at the last second, I shift and leap. It starts to rise, reaching for me with its talons, and I grab its wrist as I go past. The momentum of my charge pulls its arm far behind its back and there is a snapping sound as its shoulder cracks and dislocates. I release the wrist and tumble away, leaving the monster's right arm hanging, useless. It's certainly fast, to be able to react so quickly to the change in my attack.

Suddenly the creature rears up, towering to its full height and charges at me. The broken arm swings by its side. The creature is full of pain and fury now and has become careless, wanting only to destroy and kill me.

I leap at its broken arm again, grabbing the wrist as I leap away and using the arm as a swing. The creature tries to turn to follow me, but its own charge is taking it away and again the arm snaps tight, pulling us both up short and dropping us onto the concrete floor.

The creature lies face down, struggling to get up as I drag it around in a circle. I finally bring the shattered arm up behind it, driving its own talons into the back of its neck. The creature stiffens and howls in pain, before collapsing on the ground. The broken arm is obscenely twisted behind it and its talons are buried in its neck.

I stand and look down on it. It has talons instead of fingers and hooked claws on the back of its legs. The head rests atop huge muscular shoulders and the elongated face, with long, curved teeth, flattens toward the nose. The forehead slopes back sharply and the sunken eyes are deep inside heavily rimmed sockets. There are lots and lots of muscle on this thing.

I back slowly away from the dead creature to the middle of the floor to wait for my next attacker. The door behind me opens and I spin, expecting to see something else wanting to eat me. Instead, another military officer stands there and calls me to follow him. I leave the room, following the officer into the corridor. I don't know what to call the creature or even what it is. I feel nothing at all except the mindless requirement to obediently follow the orders and instructions I am given.

The officer leads me to another door in what seems like endless corridors. He silently motions me inside, closing the door behind me.

It is another small room. This one is clean and tidy. No blood or stains mark the walls or floor. Instead, there is a desk with a man wearing a plain black suit sitting behind it. In front of the desk is a straight-backed chair and behind the desk are two more doors.

This is the first room I have been in with so many doors in it. An open folder with a single sheet of paper rests on the desk in front of him. There is no identification of any kind. No insignia, rank or name badge identifies who this man is. He is simply a man in a black suit, sitting at a desk.

"Serial number and name?" demands the seated man.

"1798, codename Jaina," I reply automatically.

"Sit down, Jaina," he orders. Obediently I sit and wait.

"Jaina, you have passed three important tests in your redevelopment. In the first test, despite being ordered to do so, you couldn't kill another human and when ordered to, you obediently shot yourself instead. In the second test, when other humans attack you, you were unable to defend yourself or fight back. Finally, when attacked by a non-human you were able to terminate the creature without any prior orders.

These are your three primary control protocols, and we are legally required to test and make sure the protocols are operational before your deployment. In a moment, I will say a code phrase and you'll be released

from simple order mode, where you only obey orders into active-duty mode.

When you enter active-duty mode you'll have your full cognitive abilities and you'll be able to make decisions affecting yourself and others around you. You'll continue to be bound by your core protocols. For your first action, as required under international law, you must decide whether you wish to continue or end your involvement in this program. If you decide to continue, you should exit this room through the door behind me on my left, otherwise you should use the door behind me on my right. Do you understand me, Jaina?" asks the man in the plain black suit.

"Yes," I reply.

"Jaina, you are officially released into active-duty mode," announces the unknown man.

Blind obedience disappears and I know who I am. What I am and what I do. I'm a soldier in a specialist-fighting group and I carry an unusual pattern in my genome.

The pattern allows important modifications to my physical structure. It gives me increased strength, agility and speed, and an overactive immune system which enhances my natural healing ability thousandfold. Where a normal person takes weeks to recover from a shattered bone, I'll take just hours. What else do I know?

I know I was selected, and I gave up my old life for this. I have no memory of my old life, but I know I had one. I know that I've been modified, enhanced, and recycled into a single-minded fighting unit. I come pre-programmed with everything I need to fight and survive.

Knowledge of weapons, strategy, fighting techniques, vehicles, and unquestioning obedience. Everything I need to be a perfect soldier. A perfect soldier with a mission. Mission. The word ignites inside me and there is an overwhelming, burning desire deep within me to carry out my mission. My mission is everything. It's what I am. It's what I do.

Outwardly I sit there still and quiet. Inside me is a whirling, twisting desire to complete my mission. I have no idea what that mission is. There is just the overwhelming urge to complete it. I remember nothing else. There is nothing else. There is only the burning need within me. My first memory is of bright lights overhead. My body is strong, fast, and trained in every possible way to kill something.

If I don't complete my mission, will it all be undone? I think not. In fact, I have a nasty suspicion that behind door number two will be an execution squad, not a welcome home committee. Door number two doesn't matter. Door number one is the one I want. I need to know what I'm for and I need to complete my mission and quell the burning fire that has settled into an overwhelming desire inside me.

I stand and walk to my right and through the door. The unknown man has turned his attention to the papers on his desk as if he already knew my decision. As I walk through the door, he doesn't even acknowledge me. He simply makes a mark on the paper and closes the folder on the table.

On the other side of the door, a long corridor stretches away in front of me and there is a light flashing slowly above a door at the end of the corridor. I walk towards the flashing light. Other doors lead from the corridor, but there are no handles to open any of them. There is only the door at the end of the corridor with the flashing light above it.

As I walk toward the door with the flashing light, other doors open and more bloodied and cut people walk out. All of them are dressed like me and all are silent. We walk in silence and enter a room via the door beneath the flashing light.

I walk into an auditorium. It's not particularly large, enough to seat eighty people. A master sergeant stands guard by a door at the front of the auditorium. With the people who've joined me on the walk down the corridor, I take a seat and wait. Eventually the door no longer opens and closes, and twenty-eight people sit waiting with me. I count them without even knowing I've done so.

An officer in a military uniform enters the room via the door guarded by the marine and stands at the podium. Without stopping or even glancing at us, he simply starts speaking in a bored voice.

"Welcome to the Mutant Control Program. As Hunter/Killer units your mission profile has the single purpose of putting down the current mutant threat to the human race. Your physiology has been adapted to enable you to complete this task. All of you carry a specific DNA mutation which enables your re-engineering and will allow you to survive and combat this menace. A by-product of the re-engineering is that you have no memory of your previous life, and you never will. There is no link between who you are now and who you were," he pauses and checks we are paying attention.

"There are several safeguards built into your re-engineering and re-programming. These controls are specific requirements from the governments involved in this program and are there to ensure that you do not also become a menace. It is a requirement that I tell you this now, so that you are consciously aware of the control protocols placed on you. Your control protocols are simple. You must protect the human race against all threats. You can't harm a human, and you must obey any instruction given by a human. Simple, to the point and something even your kind can understand," announces the bored officer.

I get the impression he doesn't think very much of us and regards each of us as some sort of machine or mutant. Deep inside me the burning desire has subsided. I feel calm and dispassionate. I don't care what he thinks of me, my mission has begun and that's all that matters.

"You will be organised into groups of six. You will patrol, work and fight as a group. As a member is lost, they will be replaced as needed. You have all received the same training and to save time, the master sergeant will call names and hand each of you an insignia. The insignia simply represents your primary role in your allocated team. It means nothing else and grants no special privilege," explains the officer

The master sergeant takes over and starts calling names. I am in the second group, and he hands me an insignia with a pair of crossed swords.

It is the insignia of a grunt. My role in the team is to just kill stuff.

I know this. The team is simple. A team leader, medic and comms, driver and three grunts. I know we can perform any roll. The role allocations are simply to make sure that everyone knows who handles what.

The four remaining people receive insignias that are already torn and bloodied. These four people will replace those lost in already formed teams. The insignias come from the fallen bodies of those they replace.

I join my group, and the master sergeant calls us to attention and then leads us in a long line from the hall to a waiting group of medics.

First there is an injection using a large traditional needle filled with a clear fluid which the medic performs by simply jamming the needle, uncaring, into the muscle of my leg and squeezing the needle. There is a sharp pain as the needle goes in, and a lump appears as the contents of the needle are emptied into my leg.

One of the men in front of me asks what the injection is for.

"It's your nanobot population," the medic replies. "The nanobots will help to mend, heal, and purge your body of foreign objects and organisms so you can fight for longer before failure," the medic explains.

Next is the combat suit. The combat suits are not the combat suits of the regular army which have metal and ceramic plates for protection. These suits are a woven combination of titanium and carbon fibre. They are highly flexible, very strong and completely useless against a fired projectile. They are resistant to biological and chemical warfare compounds and provide limited protection against radiation. The suits also have built-in communication units and biological recording devices. Micro-cameras built into the suit capture everything we see, hear, and say, so those in charge can make sure we are doing what we are supposed to do.

The suit is completely black. I think I like that. The matching helmet is a black cowl with large round eye coverings. If I stare close in at the end

of my nose, I can see a fine black honeycomb mesh in front me and when I look to the middle ground, the mesh disappears.

Along with the rest of the men and women, I strip, dress in the combat suit, and throw the torn and bloodied hospital gown onto a growing pile of rags.

We assemble into our nominated patrol groups and march from the hangar into the black starless night and board a small waiting jet. In the narrow plane we sit and wait in two rows facing each other. Most of us have our helmets in our laps. I reach across to the woman opposite and touch her knee to get her attention. The woman is pretty with auburn hair, and she is my team's medic/comms person.

"Hi, I'm Jaina," I announce.

"Tanya," she replies.

Others follow and introductions are made up and down the facing rows. I meet my team leader Rosco, a big African/American. James, our driver and pilot is a bald, bullet-headed guy. Victor, with light brown skin and dark hair. Finally, Alexi, a huge, hulking man with massive hands and matching biceps.

Everything is new and nothing is new. I know all this. The combat suit. How to operate it and how to perform any of the roles in my team.

With our introductions made we sit in silence. We have nothing to say to each other and nothing in common except that we are all new recruits. We have no background to talk about, and everyone sounds the same with not even an accent to our speech. Everyone has just experienced the same introduction to life that I have. We have no idea who or what we had been and all of us accept it as normal.

Finally, the engines of the plane roar into life and with a slight jerk the plane moves forward and smoothly taxies to the start point at the end of the runway. The engines roar and we can hear and feel the strain of the brakes holding the plane at the starting point. Then the brakes release,

the plane surges down the runway, and the bottom of my stomach drops out as we race into the sky.

I sit and think. With no history there isn't a lot to think about. I briefly wonder who I was and what I did in my other lost life, but I find the thought hard to hold, and it keeps slipping away. Instead, I think about the plane we are in. I know what it is. How many people it can carry, its gross weight, how far it can fly, how to pre-flight it, and what it can safely sustain in the way of damage and flight manoeuvres. I even know it's over fifty years old and uses ancient fossil fuel technology.

I know all about the plane, but I don't remember the lessons or learning about it.

I decide to sleep but find that I can't. All I am doing is closing my eyes. I'm simply not tired. We fly on and on, and all of us wait in silence.

The compound.

The plane descends, falling fast out of the sky and approaching the landing at a steep angle. At the last second it pulls up, flattens out and touches down as the pilot brakes hard. We pull up so fast that I estimate we must have landed in about half the distance of what the plane would normally take to land.

The cabin door opens, and a dry, dusty wind blows in. We troop out and assemble in our groups by the tail of the plane where a new officer waits to greet us.

"Welcome to your new camp. Squad leaders to assemble in the main briefing room in one hour. The replacements follow me," announces the officer.

The four replacements follow the officer to the main hut area while the rest of us follow along.

The compound is quite simple in layout. As I walk in through the main gates, the administration building with the officers and briefing rooms are on my right. To the left is the armoury and directly ahead is the mess hall. At least I'll eat well here. I'm suddenly hungry and everyone must have been feeling the same, because as a group we change direction and head straight to the mess hall.

On my right and left there is an open area with camp quarters, which are just huge, long tents supported on poles every few metres.

The front of each tent is open to the compound and only the sides and the back of the tents are enclosed. Teams simply find an area under the shelters and make that their rest area.

Behind the mess hall is the hospital and science building. The hospital is a long, semi-permanent building that runs the width of the compound. The more permanent structures, the medical centre, armoury, admin centre and mess hall, are all large portable steel buildings bolted together with eyehooks in the roof for lifting equipment.

In a matter of hours, the entire compound can be moved to a new site. Behind the medical centre is an exercise yard where we can work out.

Cables and pipes suspended from the tops of the buildings run everywhere, and huge water trucks are parked about a hundred metres from the compound. A fusion generator and pumps send water and power to the compound in big snaking pipes and conduits.

Of all the buildings, the medical centre is by far the largest. I've never seen any of it before, but I know it all. Every detail, even what to do to relocate the compound. It's familiar and I know I should find somewhere to bunk under the long tents, but for now my immediate concern is food.

There is a lot of food, in two varieties. There are big steaks cooked only one way, rare, and masses of carbohydrates. That's it. For dessert, there is more of the same. I don't care, all I know and care about is that it's food and I should eat it.

I walk into the mess hall and wait in the queue with the rest of the group from the plane. I'm hungry. Now feed me!

Fed and again walking as a group, we head out of the mess hall to find somewhere to camp. Rosco, our team leader heads for the main briefing room and as the de facto second-in-command, Tanya leads us in search of somewhere to make our camp. We head for the right-hand quarters and start walking through the huge open tent.

Men and women greet us, calling hello and welcoming us. They are a lot friendlier than everyone else I've met so far. We get about halfway into our meandering walk through the tent when a couple of people from another patrol greet us.

"Hey guys, there's a camp at the back here you can use. We just got word that the team that used to have it got wiped out," calls a man lounging on a bunk.

"What, all of them?" asks a surprised Tanya.

"Yeah, apparently the pickup flight turned back because the team wasn't there waiting for them. Turns out the pickup flight went to the wrong place and by the time another flight was organised the team was

overrun. The pickup flight collected what was left of them. The last one died on the flight back, there wasn't that much left of her," he explains.

We stand there looking at the group in stunned silence. Our pre-programmed training has told us this never happens. Flights don't turn back until point of no return and because the mutants don't have radios and the flights don't have to worry about radio silence or enemy monitoring, the flight crew should have been screaming down the airwaves looking for the patrol instead of just heading home without them.

The guy telling us the story must have seen the looks on our faces. "Look, don't worry about it, it happens all the time. Don't rely on your pickup to get you out of trouble and make sure you finish your patrol with ammo to spare. You never know how long before your pickup gets there. I'm Jim, by the way."

We make our introductions as Jim leads us to the empty camp spot. He points out the necessities of life in the compound. Latrines, mess hall, medical, armoury, all of which we already know.

Then Jim explains something we don't know, inheritance. If I go out on patrol and don't come back, my team inherits whatever I have. If the team doesn't come back, then the next new team inherits the camp and its contents. It's simple, and since we don't have any personal effects anyway, it seems to make sense.

As we get ourselves organised, Jim sits with us and tells us about some of his battles, of things that went wrong and things that went right. We're new and we have no stories to tell, but listening to Jim as he tells us stories of his battles reawakens the burning in me. I'm only here for one reason, to hunt the mutants that prey on the people.

It crosses my mind that I might die tomorrow and then the thought slips away. It doesn't matter and it's what I'm for. The only thing that matters is that I fight the mutants. It's what I do, it's my mission, and it burns inside me, making me feel anxious and agitated. I feel I should be doing something, not waiting here.

I sit on the camp bunk that I've decided is mine and look around the camp. It's dry and dusty and there are scattered groups of people clustered together. The other team members do the same thing, claim a bunk and wait for Rosco to return from his briefing.

It's fully an hour before Rosco appears at the admin building door. Carol stands and signals to him so he can find us. He arrives at our camp and claims the last bunk before briefing us on our patrol.

"We have one hour to make our camp here and then we have a forty-kilometre run with full kit to a second camp. We need to sync our communications."

I turn my left wrist over and a touch display on the inside of my wrist lets me program in a spare frequency. Only our team will use this radio frequency. In addition, the radio will monitor the general transmission frequency. As the team tunes to the frequency that Rosco has chosen, green pixels on the screen light up showing me where each team member is in relation to me. The radios themselves are voice-activated, and I can communicate without using my hands, but if I need to transmit on the general frequency, I need to press a toggle on the display panel.

The comm unit also operates as a basic scanner and the mutants will appear as red dots on the display to give me an early warning before I walk into a fight.

We spend the next hour organising our camp and patrol patterns. We will patrol in standard format, about ten metres from each other. One on point, one left, one right, one in the middle and the last two trailing. The pattern looks like a star. It's our standard patrol pattern and spread out like this we can cover each other from range if one or more of us are overrun during an encounter.

We head for the armoury to collect our equipment. My belt kit has a trauma pack, knife, emergency beacon, water, flares, compass, and maps. The pack I carry on my back holds 20kg of rations in a thermal insulated

pack in the top and four belt feeds of five hundred rounds each in the lower half of the pack. Two thousand rounds in total.

Our weapon of choice is the MC67 which I carry. There are no slings for the weapon. It's there to be used not carried on my shoulder. The ammunition for the weapon is belt-fed from the bottom of the pack around over my left arm and into the weapon which I hold in my right hand and support with my left. Attached to the pack are two additional cartridge feeds which clip to the bottom of the weapon. The extra clips have 200 rounds in each. With those I can have my weapon ready without the backpack belt feeds.

With my gear organised, I check my weapon. It's compact and just under a meter long. There are fins on the barrel to help cool it and it has the usual laser sight if I want to play sniper. The ammunition is big and basic. All the rounds are the type that will expand on impact, making a much bigger hole going out than they do going in. The basic premise is, shoot something big at it and stop it first time. The mutants don't fall easily to light arms fire and the rounds we use are 15mm in diameter. The weapon itself is heavy, weighing in at just over 20kg. Altogether I will be carrying something near a hundred kilos. A massive weight.

I kit up and check my belts and pockets to make sure nothing is loose and that I won't lose anything on the run and then hoist my pack onto my back. Weapon ready, I assemble with the rest of my team along with the other new recruits and teams.

I shrug and wriggle my shoulders, moving the pack into a more comfortable position. I expected to feel the weight more, but it doesn't seem that heavy. It feels more like twenty-five kilos instead of the hundred that it is.

Rosco takes point, takes a compass bearing from the briefing and we set out in standard patrol format. We start easy and steady, preparing for the long run ahead. Behind us the other teams follow in a similar fashion. We run for two hours, covering sixteen kilometres, and stopping for a 30-minute rest break. There's no real hurry and we have no time limit to meet. This is an exercise to get us used to what we can do. While

we rest, I eat a ration pack and drink a water ration while I check my weapon and equipment.

Our ration packs are basic. They are just frozen raw meat and carbohydrates, like steak tartare, but with the carbohydrates thrown in. The downside to our new, improved bodies is the need to consume huge amounts of protein and carbohydrates. Meat, particularly raw meat, has everything we need to maintain our bodies, and more importantly, it provides the raw material for healing our bodies. If I am critically injured or damaged, I can pack the wound with the raw meat. The nanobots and my own healing system will strip the meat of the acids, proteins, and fats to repair the damage to my body.

Rosco and James check our GPS and map location. James takes point and we set off at the same easy pace. We stop for a rest break after another two hours of running even though we are only five kilometres from our destination. This time James and I check the GPS map coordinates and I take point for the last few kilometres to the second camp.

We reach the new camp just before dusk. Only that morning I had arrived at a new compound and now I'm already forty kilometres away from it.

While Rosco reports to the compound supervisor the rest of us prepare our camp for the night. Thinking about it, it's little wonder the regular army don't like us. We've just run forty kilometres with hundred-kilo packs and not one of us looks like an Olympic champion, let alone the elite regular army. It makes me wonder what exactly we will be fighting.

In the morning, we receive our first briefing on the mutants. I already know what they look like because I met one as part of my selection and control verification. Now I'm about to learn some of the more interesting facts from a bored officer who is standing in front of a portable projection screen. He waves his hand, and images appear on the screen to illustrate his briefing.

The mutants tend to travel in packs and are extremely fast, easily able to reach forty or fifty kilometres per hour on the run. Small packs will merge until there is anything upwards of two or three thousand in a single pack.

When we find a pack like that, we call in an air strike. When the air strike hits the pack, it will rapidly break into dozens and dozens of smaller packs and each smaller pack will also break off, all heading in many different directions at once. The briefing explains that air strikes have the effect of scattering the mutants in multiple directions and are largely ineffective.

We learn that Tactical Nuclear Devices (TNDs) had been tried, but the radiation and wide-scale destruction, meant there was too much long-term damage and not enough mutant damage.

Sometimes large, heavy bombing strikes will deploy to bomb the larger mutant packs. The bombing runs devastate the larger packs, but many still escape either unscathed or only wounded. Even wounded, the mutants are lethal adversaries. They are very strong and feel little if any pain. To kill the mutants, you need kill shots to the head or critical body parts to bring them down fast.

Interestingly the mutants don't like cold weather. A cartoon picture of a mutant in a fur coat appears on the projection screen. The officer makes some sort of joke which only he laughs at. The rest of us just look at each other puzzled as to why a mutant would have a fur coat. It doesn't make sense to me and where would they get a fur coat from anyway? The officer snorts as he resumes the briefing.

The mutants avoid areas where it gets to less than ten degrees centigrade, and they avoid snow regions altogether. This means that more and more of the human population are moving to, or have already moved to, colder areas that are perpetually cold and free from the mutants.

The officer conducting the briefing stops and a scientist takes over to explain about the mutation and how it's spread. The scientist explains

that mutant body fluid including saliva can be absorbed through the skin and infect humans, which in turn causes the infected person to mutate. The mutation starts immediately but the first indications don't manifest for nearly twenty hours, and the mutation is complete within twenty-four. If we come into contact with mutant body fluids, it will make us unwell but not cause us to mutate.

The briefing also includes some footage of contacts between regular army vs mutants and contacts between mutants and HKs.

The mutants basic plan of attack in every encounter is always the same, spot something to eat and start running for it. They travel in packs and keep coming and coming until there are no more mutants, or lunch is finished. If the mutants are injured, they will keep coming. Limping, crawling, and dragging themselves along until they reach their target. It is important to stop them fast and not have wounded mutants still coming.

Even the military armoured vehicles are overwhelmed. The mutants leap onto the vehicles and start hammering and tearing at the steel enclosures trying to get to their lunch inside. The officer tells us of encounters where mutant fluids has seeped into the vehicle. The result is angry mutants on the inside who had once been soldiers.

At the end of the briefing, we are ordered to check our equipment and rest. Tomorrow, we patrol.

My first patrol.

Our team has received our first patrol order today. A flight officer collects us and briefed us in route to a small town about 200 kilometres from the second camp.

Our orders are to terminate any mutants we find in the town and patrol the surrounding area. The primary mission is to identify the size of the mutant population, remove any large threats, and determine if the town is ready to be swept by a regular army group.

A pickup flight will collect us in five days and there will be a resupply drop in three days. The patrol will be a training exercise since the mutant population in the area is light. The five-day patrol will also help sort out any kinks in our team before we deploy against larger threats.

The entire region where our base camp is located was once a rich regional farming area with many dozens of small towns only 20 to 30 kilometres from each other. Scattered between the towns are hundreds of farms and remote properties. The entire area is now devoid of human life and only the mutants remain, roaming the area and spreading further and further afield.

About mid-morning, the helicopter drops us south of our target town. We quickly scramble out and Rosco and James take covering positions while the rest of us collect both their packs and our own.

Once we are clear, the helicopter lifts off, and one at a time we shoulder our packs and replace our weapon clips with the continuous feeds from the packs. As each team member gears up, the rest of the team covers the area around us making sure we always have the maximum available firepower.

We patrol north toward the town following the main road. We have no need to be quiet in our approach. Any noise we make, the mutants hear and come running for lunch and we'll let them have the good news. The good news will of course, bring more mutants. Our biggest concern is making sure we don't run into a huge pack all at once which we are unable to control.

As we near the centre of the town we close in to maintain our patrol pattern. Each of us has covering arcs. Anything in my arc is my responsibility and if I'm overrun, I'll call for added fire on my arc. The person in the centre of the star will provide the extra firepower. The pattern minimises crossfire, saves ammunition and makes sure there are no areas around the patrol that aren't covered.

We are thirty minutes into the town when James call *contact*. His call is followed by the deep whump sound of a weapon behind me, quickly followed by another and another. It's our first contact!

My first mutant comes into my arc, and I bring my weapon to target. The red laser dot is targeted at the top of its chest. It's running fast, and I can see more mutants following. Saliva flies from the mutant's mouth as it runs, its arms sweeping trash out of its way.

A telephone pole caught in the mutant's path falls as its talons simply slice through it. This is absolutely nothing like what was described to us during the briefing or what we had seen on the videos. The mutant I had fought in the gloomy training room must have been weak or sick, because the thing running at me now is vicious, hungry and in a hurry to feed on me.

Suddenly the monster flies backwards, crashes onto its back and lies still. I look down at my weapon to see smoke rising from the barrel and I realise I've fired. I look up at the rest of the incoming mutants, target and fire.

Everything is happening in slow motion. A car in the way of a mutant slowly flies through the air. It lands on another mutant who shakes it off and casually sweeps it out of the way before continuing its slow-motion run at me. I can see the rounds leaving my weapon in slow, lazy arcs and the puff of cordite after each round.

I go down on one knee to steady my weapon. Spent rounds fly out in slow motion, each one making a lazy spiral as it spins past the corner of my eye. The words *one shot, one* kill, run through my mind over-and-over. Around me, the rest of the team fire, covering the targets in their

arcs. I can hear the blood pounding in my ears. The sound of our weapons grows into a single long sound without end.

I hear Rosco on the radio calling for fire, his voice distorted in slow motion. I know that Tanya on centre point will provide additional coverage. Now that centre is active, if any of us becomes target-free, we will call on and let the others know should they need help with the mutants in their arc.

Tanya will call free and return to centre once Rosco's arc is under control. It is important to know who is and isn't free. With the speed and ferocity of the mutants, things can quickly get out of control.

Victor, on the rear left quadrant calls for fire. I glance round to my right and see dozens of mutants surging up the road behind us.

Spent shells cover the ground, the smoke from the cordite swirls around me and still the mutants come running out of every nook and cranny in the town like rats drawn to the smell of fresh blood.

My arc comes clear. I wait, kneeling and swivelling backwards and forwards looking for any additional threats. Behind me, more other weapons slowly stop firing. Victor's and Tanya's weapons are last.

As peace returns and silence descends, the world catches up with me and I'm left panting for breath. My heart is racing and the sound of my blood pounds in my ears.

After the screams and howls of the mutants and the sound of our weapons, the town is suddenly eerily quiet. Rosco calls for a weapon and equipment check.

Starting with Tanya in the centre, she checks her weapon and her equipment and reports, then covers each of us in turn as we complete weapon and equipment checks.

We are all suddenly jabbering on the radio with the excitement and the rush of our first contact. My hands are shaking, and I hold the weapon tightly to me to calm my shakes. We have managed to terminate seventy-six mutants, and the nearest lie just ten metres away. It was a shock, but

we came together. The pre-programmed training and weapon drills kicked in and we all survived. We are elated.

Rosco calls to resume our patrol, and we work our way through the centre of the town, all the while feeling pleased with ourselves. Twice more we encounter roaming packs, and towards evening we make camp in the centre of the town oval.

During the night we remain stealthy and keep the noise and light to a minimum. We don't want to get into a firefight in the middle of the night. The chances of missing a target are too high and a single mutant in the middle of the patrol, would have a seriously negative effect on our day.

One at a time, we take turns to eat our ration packs and drink. We will not sleep but simply rest and wait for dawn. We sit behind our packs, weapons resting on top of them as we look out into the darkness. Victor is on centre point and sits watching his scanner display. Those of us on point, alternate between peering into the dark and looking at the scanners on our wrist.

As the time slowly passes, I find myself wondering, again, who and what I had been. I keep losing concentration and instead find myself thinking of various defences and what-if plans in case the mutants come at night.

Daybreak finds us stiff from sitting still all night. One by one we eat and drink from our ration packs, check our weapons, and get ready for another day of patrolling. Today we will be heading west then south, out through the fringes of the town.

The day passes without serious incident. We have several contacts, including a few single and double hits, but after the excitement of the previous day, it is all very quiet.

Night finds us in the southwest of the town. There are no clear areas in which to make our camp, so we enter one of the empty houses and set about making it secure.

The house was deserted long ago. Looters have stripped it of anything worthwhile, and dust has settled on everything. We secure a room with only a single small window.

The room will be easy to defend, with only the door to protect as the window is too small for a mutant to enter. We know the mutants avoid entering buildings, preferring to camp outside and wait for their lunch. No one seems to know why the mutants avoid buildings, except that they have difficulty getting around inside due to their physical size.

Tanya transmits the situation report that Rosco has prepared. We will receive either an acknowledgement or new orders to confirm the report.

Our third day of patrol finds us heading for our resupply drop. Rosco has chosen the oval where we camped on the first day since it is big, spacious and it will be easy to protect the incoming supply helicopter. As part of the situation report, the co-ordinates and time for the resupply drop is included. Rosco has chosen midday as the drop-off time, and this will give us plenty of leeway to reach the oval and make sure the area is secure.

We patrol in the direction of the oval. On the way, we have a single minor contact with a pack of six mutants and arrive in plenty of time for our drop-off. We patrol the perimeter of the oval, then do a second patrol about a hundred metres out from the oval perimeter and find nothing. We work our way back toward the centre of the oval and fire two rounds that will bring any stray mutants running. It is now 11:45. The helicopter will be appearing soon.

At 11:55, we fire two more shots to make sure no mutants have wandered into earshot of our secure area and at twelve noon we hear the helicopter approaching. As the we cover our arcs, Tanya pops a flare to show the helicopter where to land. She will watch and guide the helicopter in while the rest of us cover the area around the landing place.

I hear the helicopter approaching about 40 metres off the ground and then it sweeps straight over the top of us. I'm so surprised I turn to watch it.

The cargo crew are laughing and waving at us as they continue to the northeast. I'm not the only one surprised, all of us have turned to look and Tanya has dropped her weapon as she tries to raise the helicopter on the radio. The fly-over has so completely taken us by surprise that our patrol area coverage has disintegrated. If any mutants have followed the helicopter as it flew in, we will soon be surrounded and in serious trouble.

Rosco is the first to recover from the surprise and yells at us to tighten up and organise our patrol coverage. We all turn quickly back to our patrol areas and with Rosco in the lead, we begin patrolling in the direction the helicopter has taken. Tanya is tracking the helicopter's progress while trying to raise them on the radio.

With Tanya tracking the helicopter on her scanner, we soon learn it has landed about four kilometres to the northeast. We have not yet covered that area during our patrol and have no idea what the mutant population is like in that direction.

We are close enough to the helicopter to pick up their conversation on the general radio channel. They are laughing and joking about making us patrol a further four kilometres to get our resupply.

It's very frustrating for us. We've just spent two hours making a secure landing site where we could resupply and equip. Now we have to patrol into an unsecured area and then supply and equip without the luxury of a secure point and with the added danger of night approaching. If we are to secure the supplies and find a secure area to spend the night, we are going to need to move it.

I can hear the helicopter crew laughing over the general channel. They are still joking about our extra patrol when we hear a scream. Instantly everyone goes down into contact positions on one knee, scanning and looking for the attacking mutants. Rosco calls for contact details. There is another scream and then we hear yelling over the radio and small weapon fire in the distance. It isn't us who are under attack. It's the helicopter.

I glance in the direction the helicopter had taken in time to see it trying to gain height. Then it drops to the ground and a fireball rises in its place. The sound of the exploding helicopter reaches us moments later.

Tanya is trying to contact anyone from the helicopter on the radio, and we can all hear the general channel traffic. One of the helicopter crew mikes must be jammed open, because all we can hear is the sound of flames crackling as the helicopter burns. Then that too disappears as the transmitting radio fails.

Now we have no choice but to continue to patrol to where the helicopter has crashed and search for survivors even though there is almost no chance of there being any survivors. The noise of the crashing helicopter and light arms fire from the helicopter crew would have attracted the mutants in the area and we will almost certainly be patrolling into a large pack.

As we patrol northeast towards the crash site, the town character changes to that of a new development. The houses are newer and closer together. Trees and ferns line roads and yards. It will be a nightmare working through the tightly packed houses which could hide any waiting mutants from our scanners. We'll have very little time to react if, or rather when, we run across the waiting mutant packs.

It's getting late in the afternoon and at patrol pace through the winding streets of the development, it's taking us longer than we expected to reach the crash site.

We come to an intersection in the road and turn toward the smoke still rising from the crashed helicopter. About 400 metres away, we can see where the helicopter put down in a small park. It was once an area for picnickers as there are concrete benches and tables scattered throughout the grassed area and a large car park separated from the grassed area by a low wooden fence.

The helicopter had landed in the car park and there are several crates of equipment still stacked where it put down. A hundred metres away in

the grassy park area, is the smoking wreckage of the helicopter.

The mutants swarm over and around the crash site. We can hear their grunts, snarls and howls as they fight amongst themselves and feed on the remains of the crewmembers and the mutants that were killed by the crashing helicopter.

We pause at the corner and decide how best to deal with the pack of mutants which is now quite large.

With the large, clear picnic area, the mutants will scatter and come from multiple directions forcing us to handle a wide, fast-moving group.

With such a large pack we'll be in a better position to control them if we can find somewhere to funnel them into a narrow channel and force them closer together. If we do that, we can limit how many mutants will reach us at once and concentrate our field of fire and control the fight.

The problem is this is a new development and there are no handy lanes where we can funnel them into a killing field. The houses are close together and separated only by tall fences running between them with only narrow, one-person-at-a-time gaps. We need to find something wider.

We decide to use the street opposite the crash site. It is a closed off cul-de-sac about 80 metres long, with a wide turning area at the end.

We decide to position ourselves to the right, inside the curved turning area and with the houses at our backs. When the mutants attack, they will come down the cul-de-sac, tighten up as they round the corner to reach us and give us the control we want. The risk is that they will start to turn later as they come down the road or not bunch up at all before coming at us. However, with the houses behind us and all six weapons targeting our front arcs, we should be able to control the situation.

As we work our way down the cul-de-sac, we check for any stray mutants along the way. There are no surprises, and we move into our position close to the house but with some room behind us so we can manoeuvre back toward and into the house if we need to.

James breaks down the front door and makes sure the rear of the house is secure and free of mutants and obstacles. This is our exit strategy. Into and through the house if we need it. One by one, we check our escape route in the event we need to make a hasty exit.

We move into position and check our weapons and equipment. With everyone ready, Rosco throws a flare into the middle of the cul-de-sac and fires two shots.

We wait, but not for long. The faint sound of the mutants grunting and fighting amongst themselves changes to the thunder of running feet and howling screams as they realise a new lunch menu is just down the street. As the first mutants come into view, hunting, and looking for us, we drop them. The mutants following them turn and run toward us as they spot their prey.

We target and fire. Red dot, chest, fire. I find myself saying *one-shot, one-kill* over and over. It seems the mutants will never stop coming. The bodies and spent casings pile up. Mutants stop to feed on the ones already dead, and we kill them in turn. As the dead bodies pile up, the mutants start to come further down and around. Our target front is getting wider, and the mutants are progressively getting closer and closer before we can stop them.

Victor calls weapon stoppage. His weapon has either jammed or fired on a dud round. Either way, it will be precious seconds before Victor clears his weapon and resumes contact. A second stoppage now would be verging on disaster. Victor clears his weapon and resumes contact, and then my own weapon jams. I call stoppage and clear the jam.

Top cover open. Slide back the firing lever. Lift the belt feed. Check the chamber. Remove the dead round. Reseat the belt feed and close the top cover. Relock, target and fire. My stoppage is just a dead round. Annoying, but at least it isn't a round jammed in the chamber which would take longer to clear.

The mutants are everywhere now, and we are starting to lose control of the fight. We switch our weapons to fully automatic. This is bad

practice. No longer are we managing the fight, we are now in serious damage control. In fully automatic, I just hold the trigger and move my weapon. Now we will have wounded mutants to deal with as well those still coming. We really do not need another weapon stoppage now.

We start moving back into the house. The mutants are starting to reach our fire line and talons have slashed Tanya and Rosco before they drop their targets. We need to disengage and quickly.

One by one, we move back. Covering each other as we enter the house and take new positions at the front windows. The last two in the door stay and cover the entrance. The house fills with smoke from the weapon fire and still the mutants come round the corner, running to take us.

We have seriously underestimated the size of the pack that surrounded the downed helicopter. In automatic fire, we are using a fearsome number of rounds. We must get to a new position that will let us get back to single-shot mode before the ammunition count becomes a serious issue.

Rosco calls to move back. We move toward the back of the house via our escape route and rely on the mutants' reluctance to enter buildings to give us time to escape. With luck, the mutants will find the dead mutants outside more interesting than us and that will give us additional precious time to withdraw from the area and find a secure hideout for the night.

With night approaching we don't want to be stuck in this area. There is now no thought of checking for survivors from the downed helicopter. We will just withdraw and get ourselves organised again.

One by one, we withdraw back through the house, covering each other as we move. As we disengage, the fight quickly becomes calmer, and we change back to single-shot mode.

Once in the house, the mutants become tangled up and disorientated. Their oversize height forces them to crouch low and every time they swing round to target us, their talons and arms smash into and through the walls, catching and snagging them. The mutants quickly become

furious and start smashing the walls and furniture out of the way to get to their prey. No wonder the mutants dislike buildings; it must be like fighting in a phone box for them.

We reach the back of the house. Do we stay or go? As the grunts, Victor, Alexi, and I scan the rear for mutants then move outside, providing covering arcs as Rosco, Tanya and James make for the rear of the house behind us.

The simple sheet metal fence separating the rear of the two houses falls easily and then we are inside the second house. We can hear the mutants feeding, screaming, and fighting in the first house. It appears the mutants have quickly lost interest in us, preferring a free meal from the mutant bodies out the front to crashing through buildings and chasing us.

We make our way through the house and out the front. Our scanners show no red dots in front or to our sides. Behind us, the scanner just displays one massive red dot on the screen.

We form up in our patrol pattern and moving faster than normal we patrol south and away from the massive pack behind us. After 500 metres, we slow to standard patrol pace. Better to do this properly than run into another pack unexpectedly.

We continue south, away from the crash site and about a kilometre later, come to a large shopping centre. Looters have ransacked the shops and nothing of value remains.

One building off to the left of the centre catches our interest. A bank. old-fashioned with a heavy brick design, small narrow windows, and a huge heavy door. The door is smashed open but still hangs on its hinges. The bank will make a perfect, secure site for the night. We can barricade the door closed, tend to our wounds, and check both ammunition and weapons.

We make our way inside and find that looters have again taken anything of value. That doesn't matter to us. What does matter are the heavy wooden counters still standing in the foyer.

James and Victor move two of the big, heavy counters up against the door and jam it closed. Alexi and I check the rest of the building for any other entrances, while Rosco and Tanya prepare the situation report and tend to their wounds.

I find the only other entrance, a heavy metal door at the rear of the building and the door is still bolted shut. We have a secure site to camp for the night and in the morning, if we find ourselves surrounded by mutants, we can use the narrow windows to fire at them from safety.

We group up well away from the front of the bank to minimise the chance of sound and light filtering out and alerting any passing mutants to our presence. With a small fire we heat our ration packs. Then, fed and watered we strip and service our weapons.

We don't do a full service, they're working weapons after all, but a quick clean and oil does wonders for my peace of mind. I contemplate checking the rounds in my pack for more duds but decide against it. It will mean unpacking all the rounds and then repacking them. Checking rounds is not something best suited for the field when I might need to be up and running in seconds. Instead, I check how many rounds I have remaining. I have a single fresh 500-round feed, my 200 round clips, and roughly 150 rounds on my current feed. I've used over 1300 rounds in just three days.

The others are checking their ammunition counts as well, and report we have all used roughly the same amount. There is no doubt if we are to finish the mission, we will need another resupply flight or retrieve the supplies dropped before the helicopter crashed.

Rosco prepares the situation report for transmission and includes the details of what happened to the helicopter. The base will already know that the helicopter will be down as it is long overdue.

The acknowledgement we get back informs us there will not be another resupply. The mutant population here is far greater than originally estimated and it is too risky to send another helicopter and crew.

At first light, we gear up and move to the front of the bank. All eyes are on our scanners looking for the telltale red dots of mutants. Rosco has decided, and we've all agreed, that we will try to check the helicopter crash site. If nothing else, we need the supply crates. If the huge packs of mutants are still there, we can call in an airstrike and go about mopping up any runners that escape the strike.

We patrol north, back toward the crash site. We are all on edge. The huge pack we encountered yesterday has made us nervous and cautious. After the success of the first two days, the events of yesterday afternoon have bought home the reality of how quickly we can get into trouble against a large pack.

If we can't get any of the supplies, we are looking at two days of conserving ammunition and picking our way back through the town to get to our designated pickup location.

The helicopter crash site comes into view. There are still mutants feeding and scavenging among the dead in the cul-de-sac, but the crash site looks clear both visually and on the scanner. We head to it, keeping a wary eye on the mutants. We patrol now in stealth, careful to make no noise which would attract the attention of the feeding mutants.

As we approach the helicopter, we can make out the torn and shredded uniforms of the flight crew. Nothing remains there and Tanya tries the general channel in case any of the crew survived and is hiding somewhere safe.

When we reach the supply cache the crew had unloaded before the mutants attacked the helicopter, we find four crates of equipment still undamaged.

Victor, Alexi, James and I collect two of the ammunition crates. Carrying them between us, with Rosco and Tanya leading, we head

further north across the park and away from the mutants. If the helicopter had put down at the oval instead of flying north, we could have enjoyed the luxury of full packs. Instead, we will make do with just the two crates to replenish our packs. At least we know where there are more supplies if we need them before our pickup tomorrow night.

We move north quickly. We have only two of our team in a position ready to engage. The rest of us will need precious seconds to drop the crates and bring our weapons to bear. In addition, there are uncovered arcs in our patrol pattern now. We need to find a secure site where we can cover the surrounding area while we replenish our packs from the crates.

We find our site a few minutes later. Just to the north of where the new development ends, is a low hill in the middle of a cleared field. It's perfect. High ground with a clear line of sight all around and it provides us with an ideal site for ranged attacks on fast-moving ground targets.

Reaching the hill, we set up our normal patrol pattern and one by one we replace our partially used belts with new ones. This gives us our two remaining full belt feeds of 500 rounds each, the fresh ones from the crate, and what is left on the current belt. We are not too badly off now and assuming we don't run into any more huge packs, we should be fine.

With decent weapon loads again, we box west around the development to head south and avoid the large mutant pack in the area. We would have called in an air strike to clear the mutants, but with the closely packed houses, the mutants will be able to scatter quickly, and the effectiveness of the air strike will be lost. We head south until we are past the development and then turn southeast to cover the last part of the town that we are yet to visit.

By no means will the town be secure by the end of our patrol. If we find no more large packs roaming around, only the large pack in the northeast will need to be dealt with before the regular army, using helicopter gunships and armoured ground vehicles, can sweep through the town and clean up any stragglers.

It is mid-afternoon and a pack of about 40 mutants running north and travelling fast comes around a corner in the road in front us. Surprised by their sudden appearance, James, Rosco and I drop and start clearing them. Tanya moves forward to add support, while Alexi and Victor cover our rear and flank.

The mutants are travelling fast. Their bodies roll and tumble for several metres before stopping after we drop them. A dead mutant ploughs into a derelict car and sends the car crashing into a nearby shop window from the force of the impact.

Just as we are beginning to think the engagement is over, another mutant group appears from behind us, drawn by the sound of the gunfire. James and I switch to the second group, which Alexi and Victor are handling, leaving Tanya and Rosco to finish the remainder of the pack in front.

As we fire on the approaching mutants, the ones in front are finished and Tanya and Rosco switch to the rear. With all of us firing, we are quickly finishing the pack when Rosco calls weapon stoppage.

Just as we finish the last few mutants from the second pack, a huge body suddenly comes hurtling past me, followed by two more. The mutants slam into Alexi, Victor and James, and the men and mutants go tumbling. These three must be stragglers from the first group. We have made a serious error in not keeping the area in front of us covered.

The mutants come up fast from the tumble, spinning round and sprinting to the men they have smashed to the ground. Rosco still has no weapon. Four shots fire and the three mutants fly backward from the impact of the rounds. Tanya and I have taken the outside ones closest to us, and then simultaneously fired on the middle one. From the time of the mutants smashed into the group, less than two seconds passed before we killed them. We have reacted fast enough to acquire, target and fire on two targets from a surprise impact and downed them in less than two seconds.

We move forward to the injured men and take up covering arcs. Tanya and I cover opposite ends of the street while Rosco looks to the injuries. With only two weapons up, we are in a precarious situation. All the men are suffering from cuts, bruises, and slashes from the mutants' talons. The worst affected is James, who has a shattered right arm to go with the cuts and bruises. Bits of bone stick out of his arm where it is broken.

The men use their own trauma packs to treat their wounds and stop the bleeding. For the most part, it needs just a pressure pack. Since we heal quickly, we also stop bleeding quickly. Rosco fashions a sling for James's arm. A compound break will heal within days. James hoists his weapon one-handed. Since his accuracy is affected, Rosco puts James on lead, where he has the most support from the side patrols.

We run a quick weapon and equipment check. After the impact and loss of their weapons, belt feeds have broken, and the dropped weapons need to be re-fed before we can resume our patrol.

We continue south and begin looking for a suitable site for the night. With James only partly operational, Rosco decides we should make camp at the first suitable site we come to.

The area we are in has slowly turned into a light industrial area. Workshops and small garages are interspersed with old homes. It is not an ideal location for the night. The buildings don't look particularly solid, and the workshops and warehouses are roomy and hard to secure. The mutants will have no problem getting around inside them.

We press on, turning east toward the centre of town and looking for something more solid and easier to defend. We find nothing suitable and last light finds us outside a looted disposal depot. The security bars are still intact, but the windows and doors are broken and smashed. We decide to use the depot if the rear of the building is still secure.

Alexi and I move into the building and check the area. I locate the rear door and find that it opens onto a small courtyard. The door still works, and I radio the others that we can secure the rear. I push the door closed and find bolts at the top and bottom that lock it closed. I return to the

front of the depot, where the rest of the team have already secured the front door with the long counter that once served customers.

We have a site for the night. It's not ideal and we have no clear field of fire and an insecure boundary. It is going to be a long, sleepless night as we wait for dawn and the final day of our patrol.

We spend the night watching the road. At around 2am a pack of about 20 mutants runs past, heading north at a rapid pace. We sit quiet, silent and still, and watch them until they vanish around a corner.

We have encountered a huge pack to the northeast of the town and encountered two more packs, this one and the pack that had surprised us this afternoon. The packs were all heading in the same general direction. We have no idea if the pack that came from behind us in the afternoon was heading north or not. It's something interesting to report in the morning.

Daylight finds us patrolling east again and back toward the town. We are heading for the main road we used when we first patrolled into the town and we reach it at about midday and turn south, following it toward our original drop-off point. We need to reach our pickup location and make it secure before the helicopter coming to pick us up arrives.

We encounter nothing of interest except for the occasional one or two stray mutants on the road, just as we had encountered them in the last four days between our more interesting engagements.

At the pickup site, Tanya radios in our position and we set about securing the area in the same way we cleared the oval on our first night.

In an expanding circle, we patrol out to about 200 metres from where the helicopter will land. Once we are certain the area is clear, we work our way back to the centre and set up our patrol in an expanded pattern. Tanya stays in the centre, ready to drop a flare when the helicopter approaches.

At 5:30, about 40 minutes after we have secured the area, we hear the helicopter. This time there is no laughing and joking and the helicopter

lands directly on the flare that Tanya throws.

We have already exchanged our pack feeds for the clip packs on our weapons, and we back in toward the helicopter, covering arcs in case of a surprise attack. We throw the packs in, jump aboard and the helicopter lifts off, just thirty seconds after it touched down.

The helicopter returns us directly to the main compound where we had first arrived and after we deposit our packs and weapons at the armoury, we head directly to the main briefing hut.

The hour-long debrief includes a serious reprimand for the incident with the resupply helicopter and the incident where James received his broken arm. I thought it harsh that we got the blame for the resupply incident, but our error with the two mutant packs on the street was certainly our fault.

While James reports to the medical building to have his arm checked the rest of us clean up and head for the mess hall. Dinner is calling me, and the ration packs are definitely off the menu tonight.

I don't know about the others, but personally I'm just happy to have completed my first patrol. While it was not a perfect engagement, I learnt some valuable lessons about the mutants, my teammates and myself.

Nurse's diary.

Nurse's Diary, Alexdra General Hospital

July 14, 2074, 9am

There was an incident on the main road tonight. Several cars were involved in an accident when a wild animal came running down the street. The animal disappeared into an alley, and nobody has seen it since. It must have been rabid because there was saliva everywhere. The saliva appears to be toxic, and several people arrived at the hospital seeking treatment for burns after contacting the saliva. Atypical for rabies. The patients were given rabies shots, and the burns were treated with antiseptic cream.

July 24, 2074, 4pm

We have been treating patients all day for this strange burn from the rabies saliva. Several people have gone missing from their homes, including the ones we treated last night for burns in the car accidents. The nurses doing the follow-ups have been unable to contact the patients or their families. There is now a large pack of wild animals roaming the streets and several people have been attacked.

July 15, 2074, 9am

The town is in hiding. No one dares go outside for the wild animals are roaming everywhere. They are running wild, killing, and eating people on the streets. The police are doing what they can, but we have heard no police sirens since last night and the hospital is now locked down and no one, including the staff, can go home.

July 15, 2074, 4pm

We saw on the TV that other towns nearby have a similar problem with the wild animals. The TV news is warning everyone to stay inside until the wild animals have been destroyed. This morning, we heard the sound of jets overhead and there was a huge explosion to the north, which broke many of the hospital windows. The hospital is no longer secure, and we have barricaded ourselves on the third floor. We can hear the animals howling and snarling as they roam the streets. The telephones have stopped working and no-one has been able to contact any of the emergency services since last night.

July 16, 2074, 9am

I was on the fourth floor checking on the patients when I heard screams from below. I ran to the nurses' station and switched the camera monitors to the third floor. There were wild animals everywhere. People were running and screaming, and the animals were just killing them and eating them. Those that got away are burnt from the saliva. The animals seem to stop chasing them when they have found something to eat.

July 16, 2074, 4pm

There are no more screams from the third floor, but we can hear the animals howling and snuffling about. I think they know we are up here, but they haven't been able to get to us. We have nowhere to go. None of the phone's work and there is nothing on the street now except the roaming animals. We saw on the TV that the army was tracking down the roaming animals and there were also reports that the animals have been sighted in Lincaln. There are a quarter of a million people in the city, and I dread to think of what will happen there as the animals seem unstoppable.

July 17, 2074, 9am

Last night we heard the sound of gunfire. The battle seemed to last for a long time, but it's been hours now since we heard anything. Looking outside we can see abandoned military vehicles on the roads. The TV has had nothing useful on it except more reports and stories of spreading panic and the animals seem to be spreading rapidly through the state. There has been nothing about what they are or how they are breeding and spreading so fast. We have heard nothing downstairs for hours now. I'm going to go out and see if I can get help. We have no food or water and many of the patients here are in critical need of both.

July 17, 2074, 4pm

July 18, 2074, 9am

July 18, 2074, 4pm

July 19, 2074, 4pm

The nurse left yesterday morning, and we have seen and heard nothing since. A couple of the older patients have passed away. Without food and water, we are deteriorating quickly. Two of the more able-bodied patients went up to the roof to try to light a fire and signal for help but there is nothing there to burn. We don't know what to do.

20th July 2074, 9am

The animals are in the fire-escape and have been smashing against the fire door all night. The noise is unbearable. We have

pushed whatever we can find up against the door, but it seems only a matter of time before they break the door down.

20th July 2074, 4pm

21st July 2074, 9am

21st July 2074, 4pm

Sex and money.

I finally get to sleep by putting my helmet on and covering my head with the blanket. The men snore like pigs. Our sleeping arrangements are basic at best. A camp bed and two blankets but at least on patrol we sleep sitting up and the men don't snore.

I have three free days. My patrol rotation is five days on, three days off. I head for the end of the hut, stopping and chatting with those that say hello.

Toward the end of the hut, I find a group of people watching a monitor. It doesn't have tactical displays or maps or anything, it has people running around and talking.

At first, I think it must be a camera monitor, and I ask a woman sitting at the back of the group who they are monitoring. She laughs at me.

"You must be a newbie. It's a TV. We're watching *Days of Our Lives*. It's called a TV series. Everyone here watches it," she explains.

I'm fascinated. It's so different, and I suddenly realise that I know nothing about the world or the people in it.

"Are there other things?" I ask.

"Yeah, yeah, thousands of shows. There are shows about sports and music and diving and cooking, and these story-type shows called movies. Some of those are really funny, particularly the war ones," she explains, never taking her eyes from the screen.

I want more. The show they are watching looks interesting, but dramatic. I want to know about things, the world, people, stuff.

"Are there any more TVs in the compound?" I ask her.

"Yeah, they're scattered all over. You can buy one if you like," she replies.

"Buy? How? What?" I exclaim.

"You get paid for your patrols. Every day you're on patrol, you get paid. Go and see the Warrant Officer. He'll explain it," she snaps back at me.

She's getting impatient with me, and I can see she wants to get back to her show.

"Thanks," I tell her as I walk away full of questions. Buy? Paid? I don't understand the words. I understand patrol, flank, weapons, strategy. I need to find the Warrant Officer.

I make my way to the main briefing hut and find an officer behind a high counter just inside the main door. The counter is part of a small entrance room and there is a locked door with a biometric keypad at the end of the counter.

"Can I help you?" asks the officer.

"I'm looking for the Warrant Officer. I want to buy a TV," I inform him.

"Well, since I'm the Warrant Officer, I guess I can help you out," he replies.

"How do I buy one?" I ask.

"Well, you need money to buy one, honey," he replies with a strange smile.

I don't know what the honey means or even what it is and decide to just ignore it. I want a TV.

"Well, how do I get money and what is it?" I ask.

He pulls something out of his pocket and starts explaining.

"Well, this is a wallet. It holds my money, and this is money," he explains, pulling pieces of paper out of his wallet. "The money has numbers on it which tell me how much each piece of paper is worth. You get money by going on patrols."

"Well, I've just been on a patrol, so how much money do I get?" I ask.

"You get one hundred per day on patrol. So for a five-day patrol, you get five hundred dollars. You get paid at the end of the month, assuming you haven't let something eat you," he explains.

"How much money do I need for a TV, then?" I ask.

“A little TV will cost you about two thousand,” he grins.

Hmmm, that means I have another three patrols to complete, 24 days before I can get my TV. But I only get paid at the end of the month, so it will be six weeks before I can get my TV. Not happy. I want a TV now!

“Let me get this straight. At the end of the month, I get this paper money stuff and I’m guessing I can’t have a TV before I have enough of the money for it, right?” I ask.

“Correct, honey, but there are other ways to get a TV.”

There’s the honey thing again, maybe he thinks my name is honey. “My name’s Jaina, not Honey, and what other ways are there to get a TV?” I ask.

He laughs and says, “I love you newbies. Jaina, there’s a real easy way for you to get your TV real quick,” he says with that weird smile again.

“Really! How?” I ask. I’m excited now, my own TV! I can start finding out all about things.

“Well, I’m on duty now, but tonight at 21:00 you come down here to the main gate and you and I will go for a little walk, and I’ll show you how you can get a TV real quick,” he says, the weird smile getting bigger.

This is good, this is great, and I can get a TV straight away.

“Thanks.” I leave all excited. I will get my TV so quick. I head for the mess hall and yum, food.

I take a seat with a group eating steak and fries. Steak for the protein my body needs to repair damage. Fries for the carbohydrates and energy, and fat to build reserves.

I sit and listen to them while I eat and one of them announces to the group that he’s finally saved enough money to get a TV. I’m still excited about getting my TV and I blurt out my news. “The Warrant Officer said he can get me a TV tonight.”

The table goes quiet and one of the women asks me, “What’s your name?”

"Jaina," I reply.

"Jaina, I'm Rose. It's nice to meet you, but after lunch you and I will have a little talk and then I'll take you to see a very nice lady in the science lab," says Rose.

"Sure," I reply, a little nervous that I've said something wrong.

"Are there any more women in your team?" asks Rose.

"Yeah, Tanya. Why?" I ask.

"Well, we may as well collect Tanya on the way. I'm sure she'll be very interested in our little talk too," Rose explains.

"Okay," I reply quietly. I'm a bit apprehensive now. Maybe I've done or said something wrong. I guess I'll find out soon enough. Just as long as I can still get my TV.

I hang around and wait until Rose finishes her meal, and together we leave in search of Tanya. We wander through the camp and find Tanya in the exercise field behind the medical centre. There is gym equipment, weights, bars, fighting posts and roped-off areas where we can fight each other. In one of the roped-off areas, two men are laughing at each other as they stand toe to toe hitting each other with their fists. Neither one flinches as they alternately trade blows. The sound of fists on flesh comes to me across the exercise field and I can see sweat and blood flying from their faces and bodies as they hit each other.

I point out Tanya to Rose. "Tanya, this is Rose. Rose wants to have a talk with us," I tell Tanya.

"Hi, Rose, sure," greets Tanya.

"Let's find somewhere quiet girls," says Rose, as she leads us to a sheltered area under a tree away from the rest of the compound.

"Jaina tells me she's getting a TV from the Warrant Officer," announces Rose.

"Wow," exclaims Tanya. "How are you getting one so fast? Jim had to wait like nine weeks to get his."

“That’s what we need to talk about,” says Rose, with a grimace. “Now, there are men and women. And some men…”

Twenty minutes later, I’m sitting there in shock. I have never heard of such things but then I only know about fighting and surviving so it shouldn’t be that surprising. I’m just a bit shocked at how much I need to learn.

I look at Tanya and she looks at me. We both turn to Rose.

“So, what do I do now?” I ask, feeling a little unwell for some reason.

“Well first we need to see Doctor Mathews. She’s in charge of the medical group that looks after us,” replies Rose. “She helped me out when I first got here.”

Rose leads us to the medical centre and while Tanya and I wait outside, Rose goes in to find Doctor Mathews. From the doorway, we can see Rose talking to an old woman wearing a long white coat. The woman is tall, taller than I am and has short, shoulder-length silver hair. She wears glasses which give her an air of authority, and she smiles as she listens to Rose talking to her.

Doctor Mathews is the first old person I’ve seen, and it comes as something of a shock. Everyone else I’ve met is young, like me. The Doctor turns to look at Tanya and me as Rose stops talking. She smiles and waves us in.

“Girls, I’m Doctor Mathews. I’m in charge of the medical staff here,” she announces. Then she puts her hand out in front of her, and I look at it. I’m not sure what I’m supposed to do.

“You put your hand in hers and shake it, it’s done by people who want to be your friend,” explains Rose.

I put my hand in the doctor’s hand, and she grips my hand and shakes it up and down.

“It’s called a shake,” explains Doctor Mathews. She also shakes Tanya’s hand, then says, “Come with me. Let’s talk in my office.”

Tanya and I follow the doctor and as we leave with her. “I’ll see you later, Jaina,” says Rose.

“Thanks Rose,” I reply. I now feel unwell and nervous, and my stomach feels all mixed up.

Doctor Mathews office is a disaster area. Paper and books cover every available surface of her desk that multiple computer displays don’t already occupy. Books and models of human body parts fill a huge bookcase, and a couch covered in more books and papers is jammed against the wall under a small window. Doctor Mathews clears the couch by dumping everything on it in a pile on the floor and asks us to sit down. She sits in her chair behind the desk and swivels around to face us.

“Right girls,” announces the Doctor Mathews, clasping her hands together in front of her and leaning toward us. “Rose has pretty much filled me in on your story and even saved me some time by explaining some of the basic facts of life to you. Why they cannot give you social skills and some basic life facts while they’re filling your heads with military manuals is beyond me. It would save us all a lot of aggravation.

But first things first.” In a suddenly commanding voice, Doctor Mathews continues, “I hold the rank of Colonel in the army and that means I outrank everyone here except for General Adam Richard, the Commander of this base. As your commanding officer, I am ordering both of you that under no circumstances are you to obey an order from anyone here unless it directly relates to your military roles or conflicts with your primary protocols. That is an order, do you understand?”

We both automatically snap upright, eyes front, heads straight. “Ma’am. Yes, Ma’am,” we reply, standing at attention.

“Good, relax. Why do you want a TV so badly, Jaina?” asks Doctor Mathews, in a quiet, soothing voice.

“Well, I saw the one in the hut, and one of the other girls said there were lots of shows on it about all sorts of things and I thought if I can get

my own TV then I can watch anything I want and learn about everything," I explain, blurting out my words.

"Hmm. Why do you want to watch anything you like, Jaina?" asks Doctor Mathews, studying me intently.

"Well..." I'm nervous because I'm not sure if we're allowed to watch anything we like. All I know is the military "need to know" and there's probably a lot of things I'm not supposed to know.

"I want to find out about everything. All I know is how to fight and survive, but already today I've learnt about money and sex. There must be thousands of things to know," I explain, a little puzzled. I'm not sure myself why I want to know all this, I just do. I frown and look down at the floor to avoid the doctor's eyes while I puzzle over it. The feeling is almost as strong as the feeling I have about my mission. It burns in me.

Doctor Mathews sits back in her chair, examining us carefully. "Tanya, what about you? Do you want your own TV too?" she asks.

"No, I'm happy to watch whatever the others are watching," replies Tanya with a shrug. She sounds bored with the whole thing.

"If you want to leave Tanya, you can. I just need to talk to Jaina for a little longer," announces Doctor Mathews.

"Thank you, ma'am, I will," says Tanya, leaping to her feet. "See you in camp Jaina."

I watch Tanya leave the room and again my stomach does flips and churns away as my anxiety grows.

"Jaina, not many, only a few of you, are interested in anything other than your military roles. You are aware that the average career length of your role is about six to nine months?" asks Doctor Mathews.

"Yes," I reply. I know this already. My life expectancy is at most nine months. It's the longest any of us have survived and not something I care about. Live or die, I just need to complete my mission.

“Well, are you also aware that you have an automatic top-secret security clearance as well?” asks Doctor Mathews.

“No, ma’am, I didn’t know that” I reply.

“All HKs have a top-secret clearance. It’s required for your operational status, and you already know everything there is to know about military equipment, stations, weapons, operational readiness and the like anyway. Now, because of that clearance, you can access almost anything you like and at any time, so I’m going to lend you this until you can buy your TV,” explains Doctor Mathews.

Doctor Mathews opens a drawer in her desk and takes out a small computer. It’s about the size of a small book, but only the thickness of my little finger. “You know what this is?” she asks.

“Yes, it’s a field computer. We use them for plotting targets and coordinating ranged and air attacks. We can overlay area maps and then use the touch screen to indicate precise attack points. It has a high-speed satellite data link and will run continuously for 14 days before requiring recharge,” I reply.

Doctor Mathews shakes her head and smiles. “Yes, Jaina,” she replies patiently. “That’s the military one, but this is the non-military one. Why don’t you take this and have a look at it? You might find it interesting,” she says, passing the computer to me.

I take the computer from her. I feel quite let down. I’d been hoping for a little TV.

“Thank you, Doctor Mathews,” I announce, standing to leave.

“And Jaina, I want you to come and see me for a few hours each time you return from patrol,” orders Doctor Mathews.

“Yes, ma’am,” I reply, as I close the door to her office behind me and wander back to my camp.

I feel quite depressed. This morning, I had learnt about TV and the excitement of that. Then the Warrant Officer got me all excited about getting a TV straight away, only to have Rose and the doctor dash that

hope and now I have a gimpy computer on loan from Doctor Mathews. I feel quite, I don't know, depressed, I guess.

I find my way back to my camp and flop down on the bunk on my stomach with my arms and head hanging over the end. I push the on switch on the gimpy little computer. The screen lights up and words scroll across. It says "Google" and has a little box under the title. There are a couple of highlighted words underneath that say Search and Random. I push the screen where it says Random and a long line of alternating highlighted text fills the screen. I look down the list and one entry says fashion. I wonder what that is and I touch the screen again.

Six hours later, I realise I'm hungry and thirsty, and my shoulders ache from lying on my stomach and hanging over the end of the bunk for so long. I get up, still carrying Mr Gimpy as I've decided to call the little computer. I stretch and roll my shoulders. OMFG (I learnt that too, smiley face, LOL), and I head for the mess hall.

I read and watch movies while I eat. I watch news presenters talking about what is happening in the world and stories about us. Hunter/Killers, HKs, they call us. And I read about how terrified the world is and how the mutants are destroying everything. I learn about fashion and dresses and cooking and food with lots of tasty pictures, and history and music and... It is everything I want and more. I spend my entire rest time with Mr Gimpy and the Warrant Officer can drop dead for all I care.

Mr Gimpy is cool, way cool. I learn about everything. I even stumble across websites that talk about our alien guests who arrived twenty years ago.

When the Gorkn arrived in earth orbit in October 2055, the usual end-of-the-world scenarios ran wild in the news and media reports for months while the huge alien ship just orbited the Earth and remained silent despite all attempts to contact it. I find and read all the news stories about the Gorkn that I can.

Then the United Nations announces that they are in contact with the aliens. The story goes that the Gorkn are refugees fleeing from a disaster. A disaster that as far as I can find out they never fully specified, and they had taken this long to contact us because they had to learn the Earth language, and our multitude of languages made this a little difficult.

The Gorkn had arrived seeking refuge and raw materials to repair their ship and they exchanged technical information in payment. There are photos and videos of the first meetings. Details of technical information the Gorkn provided. Fusion power, medical information, computer advances, micro, nano and pico technology.

Looking at the photos and videos, I see that the Gorkn appear to be pretty much like humans. On average about thirty centimetres taller and more heavily built. Their eyes are slightly deeper set, and they have darker skin tones. The only things the Gorkn refuse to share with us are weapon and advanced space flight technology, an issue that seems to cause a certain amount of friction in our relationship with them.

There is various cult websites dedicated to the Gorkn. Conspiracy websites, technical websites, blogs apparently run by Gorkn. Interestingly, the sites are all dated. The technical information is all there, but the sites show that it's been years since many of them were active. A lot of the information is archival stuff. I even borrow a field computer from the armourer and browse through the military databases, but again there is nothing recent in relation to the Gorkn.

It's as if the Gorkn had come along, said hello, and then gone and sulked in their room. The ship is still there in a low geo-synchronised orbit, just on the outer edge of the stratosphere, but to all intents and purposes, the people of Earth haven't spoken to the Gorkn for over fifteen years. I find it all very interesting but boring. There are loads more interesting stuff to look at, like fashion and music and food and more food.

My birthday.

January 26, 2077. It's my birthday. I turn one today. Yep, I made it to 12 months old. My nine-month life expectancy has turned into twelve months. I guess I'm living on borrowed time. According to the movies I watch, I should get a cake to celebrate, instead I get another patrol.

I look around at my team. As the squad leader, I'm responsible for them now. Rosco died when two mutants ripped him in half. It was a horrific battle. We were patrolling in what had been a big city and came across a pack of mutants. Well, it turned out the pack was part of a reeeeally big pack, and we ended up escaping into the sewers and calling in an airstrike which nearly took us out too.

Tanya was the next to go, then James, Alexi, Victor, Peter and Steven. Even Rose is gone too, and the list goes on. I've had fifteen team members now. The rest of the teams have fared just as badly, and we're spread out all over the compound. There's plenty of room now since we're lucky to get a replacement once a week.

We've also moved the compound three times. We move it to areas that are close to high mutant populations, so we don't have too far to travel. We don't use the helicopter drops anymore. The reliability was getting atrocious and General Adam, our CO, made the decision to use land vehicles instead. The regular army patrols the cleared areas, while we clear the high population areas. It's the same now on all the continents.

The HKs clear the high population areas, and the regular army patrols the cleared areas. Except for airstrikes, we don't use the regular army if possible. It helps avoid stupid mistakes.

I've also discovered that there are nearly 10,000 HKs and I joined the program only three months after it started. My official designation and serial number, Jaina1798.

I don't have Mr Gimpy anymore. Instead of a TV, I bought a newer and faster computer model with my money and gave Doctor Mathews back hers. I call the new one Hermi.

I still meet with Doctor Mathews whenever I come off patrol. We discuss religion, music, philosophy, culture, fashion. Although, I think she just humours me with the fashion and music. We also talk about what is happening in the world and interesting news reports. I think Doctor Mathews is trying to educate me with the philosophy and culture thing, so I humour her too and listen and learn.

The world economies have all pretty much collapsed and the only countries doing reasonably well are the ones that are mutant-free and from I've what read, the people there spend most of their time freezing. Everything I know about the world, people, and anything else, comes from the Net and at least the Net is still working.

Refugees fleeing from mutant-infested areas are a huge problem for the mutant-free countries. Most of the big cities of the world like LA, New York, London, Cairo, Paris, Tokyo, Beijing have turned into refugee camps. Massive steel and barbed wire fences surround the cities and entry is strictly controlled. Before anyone can enter a city, there is a mandatory 48-hour quarantine period which is strictly enforced by the surrounding military forces.

The world population has dropped unbelievably from nine billion a few years ago to just over two billion and dropping. Apart from random guesses by the many mutant experts who make weekly TV guest appearances, nobody knows how many mutants there are.

Some countries are gone altogether and there is no news or communication from them. There is little or no communication from South America, Australia, most of Asia, India, Africa, the Middle East. Other countries are in serious trouble. Europe, North America, parts of Russia and China. The colder the climate, the fewer mutants there are.

It's incredible how fast the mutants have spread. It's only been a bit over two years since the first mutant sightings, yet they have spread almost everywhere. Outside the cold areas of the world, the only safe places are the islands in the Pacific and Indian Oceans and if you don't have clearance to be near their coastline or air space, they have a shoot first, ask questions later policy.

There are also stories on the Net about how the complete populations of cities turn into mutants overnight. I find these stories hard to believe. You need to be in contact with the mutant saliva or body fluids to be affected, but still the stories persist.

Many cult sites have sprung up of course and there is lots of blame on the aliens too. Many of the sites claim the aliens are behind the mutation because they want to take over the world. Personally, I don't have an opinion. I have a job to do. It's all I know.

Of course, there is some good news mixed in with all the bad news. Since the only way the mutants can spread is by infecting people, then as long as the current population stays unaffected, eventually we will be able to eradicate the mutants for good. So far, the HK program is working pretty well, with large areas of various countries already cleared, although the people can't return until the entire country is secure, otherwise it will all just start again.

I've started my own blog called jainasblog.com. I've been writing about my experiences and the people that I work with and what it is I do. My blog has become a bit of a diary too, but I'm a bit haphazard about updating it. The military police censor my blog heavily before each post is published, but it's still quite popular. Some of the comments are nice and positive and some of them aren't. Many of the posts call me a freak, a mutant, a murderer and worse. The comments don't bother me, well, most days anyway.

I've been slashed and sliced, had my arm broken, lost an eye and had my nose broken a couple of times. The wounds heal quickly and there aren't even any scars to show.

I also spent a week in the rez unit when I lost an arm to a mutant. The medical centre is not so much an operating room or hospital as a morgue, or so I thought. I saw the OR for the first time six months ago.

We're patrolling in small towns and covering the towns using a combination of foot and vehicles to get around. Using the vehicles, we can carry our own resupply for our packs and that makes us a lot less

dependent on the regular army. They like it, we like it, and it seems to be working out. On this occasion, my patrol has been running for six days with another four days to go.

We run ten-day patrols now as the vehicles allow us to carry more equipment. The downside to using the vehicles is that there is also a lot more risk. We run the risk of drawing a big mutant pack and losing the vehicle, but the extra equipment and coverage compensates for that.

Today our vehicle is secure to the north of the town, and we are slowly patrolling back to it. The country here is wheat farming land. The wheat that waits for harvest surrounds the road to the verge and the town is behind us as we head up the hill and away from it.

The sound of an electric engine whining heavily in the distance is out of place. Apart from mutants, we rarely hear anything except bird sound and the occasional cry from an animal caught by a mutant.

I signal the team to move out into flanking positions, cover our arcs and wait. The engine is getting nearer and the whine is becoming louder. The engine sounds in serious need of an overhaul and I stand waiting in the middle of the road with my weapon ready.

A big prime mover hauling a covered trailer comes over the crest of the hill in front of me. The driver has seen me and is braking hard. The sound of the airbrakes is loud in the still country air. I radio the team to watch for any mutants drawn by the sound.

I step to the side of the road as the driver tries to stop, and he finally comes to a halt a good fifty metres past me. I can see into the rear of the trailer. It's full of furniture, TVs, cooking equipment and various bits and pieces. It would appear we have a truck full of looters.

The doors of the cab swings open and four men get out and start walking back along the length of the truck toward me. They're carrying light arms weapons. One of them even has a bolt-action hunting rifle and goodness knows what he thinks that is going to do in a fight with a mutant.

They have bandoliers of ammunition crisscrossing their chest and they wear surplus camouflage suits. The men stop about five meters from me, their weapons pointing all over the place. This is the first time I've encountered any people outside our compound and I'm curious and cautious at the same time.

"Well, what do we have here?" announces one. He's a big old boy, red-faced, and his belly sags over his trousers.

"Hunter/Killer team," I reply. "Where are you guys headed for?" I don't care whether they are looters or refugees. I figure I'll let them know what areas are relatively safe and we can get on with our job.

"Oh, here and there little lady," he replies with a smirk. A couple of them snigger.

"The town below is clear. There's another town about ten kilometres further south and another fifteen kilometres east from that. We went through them four days ago, so it should still be clear. If you hang around those you should be pretty safe," I tell them.

"Well now, we can look after ourselves see. Got ourselves some nice guns here and some grenades in the cab. We even bagged a couple of those mutes two days ago just north of here," he grins.

"Well, no problem then. Take care," I turn to go, getting ready to re-form the patrol and move on.

My first in-person encounter with people outside those who control us, and I get these guys. The idiots could easily get us killed and I want to put distance between them and us. Just because we have a control protocol that says we must protect them doesn't mean I have to go out of my way to do so.

"Now just a minute, lady. You just stay right there."

I stop dead in my tracks. I can't move. The men and women that send us out on patrol are always very careful with their instructions and orders. They always use only general terms and rarely a direct order. The control that ensures our blind obedience also means that we are

extremely literal-minded. A careless comment like *go jump* means that literally, that's what we do.

I've just been told to stay, and I'm compelled to obey. I have no choice. My team and I could really get into some trouble now. However, just because I can't move, that doesn't mean I can't think and talk.

I radio the team. "Move out and get to the vehicle fast. Run now! Cover me from 500 metres out. I'm in trouble. I've just been told to stay here," I call into my comm unit.

My team is good. I watch them break from cover and sprint north going fast. One of the four men went to shout something and then took a shot at Rick instead. Rick is a small guy, five foot nothing and as fast as lightning. He's funny too, always copying the TV shows he watches with a passion. I figure 500 metres out my team can watch for mutants and still be out of range of being told to do something dumb by these guys.

I stand there waiting.

"Well, looks like your buddies have left you. Why don't you give me that fancy-looking gun you have there?" Beer Belly says.

"Sorry, I can't do that," I reply. "That would give me no means of protecting you when the mutants come." At least the first protocol is overriding any truly dumb instruction they might give me. They all laugh.

One of the other men, a tall skinny guy with a greying beard and a stupid hat that looks like some sort of animal but is probably fake, says, "Hey, I've read about these guys. Their some sort of mute as well, except they have to obey humans."

"Obey us, eh?" says Beer Belly. "Well, let's see what we have then. Take your helmet off, lady."

Damn it, I can't stop myself. I lower my weapon, reach up and take my helmet off.

"Well, aren't you a pretty thing," he smirks. They come close to me and start poking and prodding me.

“She sure feels like a woman,” says the short round one in the checked shirt. With his wispy hair, small pudgy hands, and black glittering eyes, he reminds me of a toad I saw illustrated in a book on the Net. I back away in disgust.

“Don’t you go moving from me,” he snaps as he grabs my arm and pulls me back toward him.

By now, I’m actually thinking a mutant attack would come in handy. At least my primary control would let me deal with that and potentially get me away from these guys.

“Why don’t you give us a dance?” says Beer Belly.

“Yeah, a lap dance,” sniggers Toady.

“Dance, lady!” orders Beer Belly.

I move back and start dancing as I had seen the women in the videos on the Net dance except my movements are slow and jerky. This isn’t something I’ve ever done and although I’ve seen it done and I know how it’s supposed to be done, I don’t know how to move.

Double damn it. I have work to do. There are mutants around and these idiots are messing me about. I stand there dancing, swaying around and still holding my weapon. The men are laughing and catcalling. One of them fires his weapon in the air and then the others start doing the same.

“Enough of this,” announces Beer Belly. “I reckon that fancy suit you got there and that gun of yours will fetch a nice price. Get the suit off and hand over the weapon,” he orders.

“I can’t do that. Like I said, without the weapon I have no means of protecting you,” I reply, grimacing as the protocols override each other and sharp stabbing pains flicker though my head.

“Well, in that case we’ll just take it off you,” announces Toady.

“No,” announces the last of the four, “she’ll take it off herself.”

So far, he's said nothing and has just stood at the back of the group watching. Now he comes forward, and the other three go quiet and back away from him.

This man is tall, with blonde hair and dead eyes and he's muscled and physically fit. He walks up to me, leans toward me, and quietly says, "Take the suit off."

"I ..." the pistol hits me in the temple and knocks me to the ground. He's fit, strong and fast.

I shake my head and try to stand, and the pistol hits me on the back of the head. I go down again. My vision is blurred, and blood runs down my face from where the pistol has cut the back of my head and temple.

He kneels beside me and quietly whispers in my ear, "Take the suit off or I'll kill you."

He's cold and dark, and the quiet voice worries me more than anything else does. I can kill him in a heartbeat, except with the control protocols there is no way I can raise so much as a finger against him.

"I can't..." The sound of the pistol firing is remarkably quiet. Sort of a sharp crack, compared to the deep whump of our weapons. The pain as my knee explodes is anything but quiet and I scream in agony. I roll away and he follows, staring down at me and grinning. He fires again, this time at my head and narrowly misses me. Shards of metal and bitumen fly up and cut my face.

"I'm going to die to a psychopath I have to protect," I think to myself. My team can do nothing except watch helplessly. They're all bound by the same protocols as I am.

I lie on the ground, sobbing in pain from the shattered knee. He kneels beside me again. "Now take the suit off and I won't kill you."

I'm in self-preservation mode. The control protocols are running across my mind. *You must protect the human race against all threats. You cannot harm a human. You must obey any instruction given by a human.* I have to survive to protect these people.

I've dropped my weapon when the pistol first hit me. Through a haze of red, I watch Toady trying to lift it. Like every HK, I can carry, target, and fire the weapon in one hand, but Toady is struggling to pick it up with both.

There is a thumping in my head. A deep, rhythmic thumping, the sound of the blood in my veins thumping... No, it isn't that. The sound is getting louder. I am going to die unless I comply.

"Okay," I whisper. "I'll take the suit off."

The thumping is getting louder. I look up, past Blondie and the other men. My knee is screaming in pain, and I see the cloud of dust raised by the incoming mutants attracted by the weapon fire and they are getting close, fast.

"Mutants," I whisper in pain. "Give me my weapon."

Blondie stands and turns to look in the direction I point. The other men look at what has attracted his attention. At the sight of the dust cloud raised by the incoming mutants, they start running for the cab of the truck and drop my weapon about seven or eight meters away.

I start to drag myself to my weapon. I hear the sound of the big truck engine whining into life as my tormenters prepare to leave. I can feel the rhythm of the running mutant feet in the ground beneath me, and the shattered knee is a blinding red blanket of pain that covers everything.

I reach my weapon only to find the belt feed has broken when I dropped it. I still have my pack on, and I roll out of the pack straps, struggling to get to the weapon clips. I pull myself up, lean back against the pack and bring the weapon on target, the clip going in at the same time.

The first mutants hit the cab and go in one side and out the other, ripping everything inside apart as they do. The screams of terror echo from the cab, are cut short and the sound of the truck engine dies.

Mutants scream and howl in the cab of the truck as they fight over the remains of the four dead men, and seconds later, they rip off the top of

the cab and throw it aside like discarded tissue paper.

The mutant hits me like a train just as I get my weapon up and firing. I look around in a daze. The mutant is dead, clutching my weapon in its talons. My arm and hand are twitching and still trying to fire the jammed weapon.

"Strange," I think over the sound of my team's weapons on continuous fire, "why is my weapon over there?"

I wake up briefly. The truck is moving so fast it feels like it's almost flying. I look at where my arm had been and the open ration packs packed into it. There is a face above me, but it keeps coming and going as if it is pulling back and then coming close again. The truck hits a ditch or something and I bounce in the air and pass out.

I wake up at the compound on a stretcher. My team are sprinting for the medical unit with the stretcher between them. I start screaming and yelling, "I'll be all right, I'm not dead, don't put me in the coffins."

They put a tube in my nose. I fight and scream as three of my team hold me down while the doctors give me injections. My body loses the fight as the drugs take effect. They tape my eyes closed while I scream at them, "I'm not dead! I'll be all right!" But no sound comes out, the scream is only in my mind. I feel them lift me and put me in the coffin. Wet, slimy goo covers me, and the world goes dark.

Time passes and I have nightmares of monsters in white coats, of strange, towering monsters. I'm running, always running, and the monsters are always there, fighting and dying.

Occasionally I struggle briefly, trying to escape from the coffin, but I have no strength and can barely move. It's completely dark and I can hear nothing. The only thing I can feel is the slimy goo as the darkness in my mind comes and goes.

The slapping is annoying, “Jaina, wake up. Jaina, wake up.”

I open my eyes. The doctor and three other medical staff are looking down at me. I’m lying on a table naked and covered in wet, slimy goo.

I whisper, “I’ll be okay, I’m not dead, don’t put me in the coffin.”

“We know you’re not dead, Jaina. You’ll be okay,” says one of the doctors.

I lie on the table as they wipe my chest, listen with their instruments and examine my arm. “That’s nice, they put my arm back on,” I think.

“Jaina, you need to get up,” says the doctor. They help me to my feet. I feel weak and I’m shaking as they lead me to a shower where I stand in the cubicle shaking as they turn the water on.

The shower is cold, and I start to shake more violently as the water washes the goo from me. The shower stops and I step out, still shaking and now barely able to stand up. One of the medical staff starts to dry me with a towel. At least the pain from my knee is gone, but I feel so weak.

I take the gown they hand me and try to put it on. The shaking is almost out of control. My hands, my legs, my body, all shake violently and continuously. Somebody drapes the gown over my shoulders and leads me to a table and a chair at the end of the hut.

I collapse in the chair, shaking so much I can barely sit upright. There is a huge meal there and I start to eat. Now the shaking is so bad I have to use both hands to hold the fork to eat the meal. It takes me a long time to finish it. I drop more of the food than I eat. In the end, I just pick the food up with my fingers and scoop it into my mouth. When I finish the meal, they lead me to a bed where I collapse, shaking. I sleep.

Doctor Mathews is reading when I wake up. The sun is streaming in through the window. She hears me move, looks up from her book, and sees that I am awake.

“Welcome back, Jaina. I thought I’d lost you there.”

I smile weakly at her, “I thought you were going to bury me. What happened?” I ask.

Doctor Mathews tells me what happened from the report given by my team. They had seen the incoming mutants and started driving toward the looters’ truck. The mutants were travelling far faster than they thought and hit the truck before they were in firing range. With the one round left in my weapon, I killed the mutant that had taken my arm. I had put the clip on but had not removed the remains of the belt feed. The round had fired and then the weapon had jammed because of the mis-feed clip. It hadn’t mattered, because when the mutant hit me, it had taken my arm off at the shoulder before it died.

The team had come in fast, firing from the back of the truck on fully automatic. The automatic fire had torn the mutants apart and they hadn’t been worried about ammunition counts. My team had thrown me in the back of the truck, packed the stump of my shoulder with ration packs and driven at high speed for the compound.

We were 800 kilometres from the compound though and they were radioing for an emergency pickup. The General had no available helicopters because the helicopters were only used by the regular army, and we had to liaise and co-ordinate with them for their use.

My team had no other choice but to keep driving. It took them eight hours to get back to the compound. The medical team knew they were coming and had prepared a rez unit. I don’t know what a rez unit is and asked.

“Basically, in very simple terms, it is a stainless-steel bath with a sealed lid. We tape your eyes closed, put an oxygen tube in your nose and drop you in. The bath is filled with a whole mix of chemicals, huge amounts of protein, amino acids, bacteria, everything in a sort of congealed semi-liquid form. Everything that is needed to create a body or body parts. Between the nanobots in you and the accelerated healing you have, your body and the bots use the goo to repair and reconstruct your body. The only problem, you need to be alive, and you were close to not being alive. You lost a massive amount of blood, and the trauma kits you carry had

nothing like enough to keep you going," explains Doctor Mathews. Why did you think they were coffins?" she asks.

"Well, every time someone comes in here really badly injured, they don't normally come out," I reply.

"Yes, well, for most injuries like missing fingers, feet, hands, or deep wounds, we just pack the injury with the goo and wait. In your case you had a lower leg barely attached, you'd lost your arm at the shoulder, you had severe bleeding in the skull from the pistol whipping and various wounds on your face and you'd lost so much blood we couldn't get a pulse anywhere. We had nothing to lose so we just dumped you in the bath. It usually works if you're not too far gone and there's enough left to stay alive while your body repairs," shrugs Doctor Mathews.

I stretch out my arms and legs, wriggle my fingers and toes. Fingers, toes check. Looking good. "So how long have I been here and when do I get out?" I ask.

"Well, you've been here a week. You can have Hermi tonight and you can leave in the morning. How does that sound?" she replies.

"Hmmm, a comfortable bed. Never had that before. Sounds good to me," I reply. I'm happy, I'm alive and I have both arms. Yep, it could be worse.

I sleep the sleep of peace. No dreams, no nightmares, and no waking up. When I wake in the morning, a replacement suit is waiting for me. I get up and spot a shower in the corner. That will be nice. As I walk toward the shower, a woman walks past in the same direction.

I stop, back up and turn. I've never seen myself in a mirror, let alone a full-length one. I turn sideways, back ways, sideways, suck my belly in and push it out. I lean forward, peering at my face and eyes and finally stick my tongue out at myself. From what I've read and seen on the Net, I think I could be considered attractive. I take a closer look at my reflection and examine it critically.

172 centimetres, age looks to be about 24 based on my extensive Net research, but I have no idea. I still can't remember any of my past and have no expectation of ever remembering anything from before my new life. Blonde hair tightly cut at the neckline, slightly oval eyes with a weird black colour and strange sparkles in the pupils. Pert nose, nice soft pink lips, nicely arched brows. Hmm, so far so good, except for the eyes, I'm not sure I like them. Nice neck, firm breasts, maybe a 36C but really, I have no idea. I've never owned a bra, but overall, my breasts look ok to me. Nice firm stomach with good definition and no flab and considering how much running I do. there had better not be, I decide. Slightly flared hips and long, shapely legs. Well, I've seen them before but not in association with the rest. I twist and turn my leg to see my calves and, well, they don't look too bad, I decide.

I turn back and stand in front of the mirror with my hands on my hips. So that's me, that's what everyone else sees. I shrug, grin, and head for the shower. Meh, good enough.

Twelve months old, who would have thought it? I jump on Hermi, my little computer. I'll update my blog and maybe my diary while I eat breakfast. Tomorrow we are out on patrol again, but today is my birthday and I'm going to spend it doing my favourite thing, browsing the fashion and music websites. It's a good day and tomorrow I'll go back to work.

The breeder.

We leave early with the truck packed with supplies. Our flight/driver Steve, a tall dark man, is driving the truck southeast along an old freeway littered with blowing tumbleweeds, and towards our patrol area. We sit in the back on top of all our equipment.

I'm listening to some classical music from the 1980s on Hermi through a pair of ear buds. Rick is amusing Cheryl, a petite brunette, and our comms officer, by reciting scenes from various TV shows.

Joe and Brian are arguing about whether head shots or chest shots are the most effective against mutants. Personally, I think a nice big chest makes a good solid target, but whatever.

I look them over. They're a good team, well-disciplined and dependable in a fire fight. I lie back and start scrolling through music sites, looking for something more interesting than classical '80s stuff.

We reach our target patrol area early the next day as we didn't stop on the transit phases. The fusion reactor engine in the truck means we don't have to stop or carry fuel like in the old days of the last century.

The briefing before we left had us wondering what was going on. Our patrol area was cleared only the previous month by another team, but recent flyovers had detected huge packs of mutants in the area again.

Our mission profile is to patrol the area, verify what the flyover had detected, and then call in targeted air strikes. The huge rise in the mutant population in the area couldn't be accounted for and with no humans left in the area, everyone wanted to know where the mutants were coming from.

We hide the truck in an old warehouse outside the small city. Ever since my encounter with the looters our standing orders are to make sure the vehicles are hidden and secure when we're on foot and to actively avoid any people unless they are under direct threat or attack.

Forming up in our patrol pattern we head for the city, avoiding the main road. Stealth is the game today and we want to observe rather than fight. We reach the outskirts of the city and with Cheryl watching her

scanner on centre we commence our patrol towards the middle of the city. Whispered radio commands from her move us out of the path of roaming mutants as the winding route takes us closer to the primary target area, the centre of the city.

Originally, the small city must have had a good-sized population because we find ourselves working our way through an office area with many high-rise buildings.

About a block from our target area, I signal the team to enter one of the derelict high-rise buildings and we make our way inside through the broken glass doors, up the fire escape and onto the roof. We will be secure on the roof if we don't draw attention to ourselves and as a bonus, we can easily observe our primary target area.

My team takes up position on the roof overlooking the buildings. Our target area is about 300 metres away. It is certainly congested and at first glance, there does appear to be a large number of mutants roaming about the area.

With my field glasses focused on the mutants and the display panel inside the compact unit magnifying and recording everything I look at, I zoom in on the target area. There are lots, and I mean a lot, of mutants. The computer in the field glasses is doing a body count and the counter in the corner of the display hits 2000 and keeps climbing.

I spend the next hour just watching the mutants. The rest of my team does the same thing on different corners and edges of the building.

It is now mid-afternoon and time to call in the airstrike. I take out the field computer and pull up the city and area map overlay. Tap on the screen, main target here, secondary targets here, here, and here, staggered five seconds after the primary. My plan is that the mutants will scatter when the main target is hit, and the secondary strikes will hit the ones that are fleeing.

I double check the co-ordinates and the strike times and transmit the strike command. Within seconds, the computer panel lights up with the acknowledgement and a countdown timer appears on the display

showing minutes and seconds to impact. I transmit the timer information to the rest of my team, and we wait, watching the mutants below.

Sixty seconds to impact. “Incoming in sixty seconds, take cover!” I announce into the radio. We move down into the security of the fire escape and pull the fire door closed behind us. We crouch just inside the door, open our mouths to avoid the pressure wave and wait. I watch the countdown on the field computer. 10 seconds, 5 seconds, 1 second.

The blast from the incoming missiles shakes the building. Dust rains down on us and we feel the shockwave from the main strike in our feet. Five seconds later the first of the follow-up missiles hit.

We wait until the echoes and the noise have died away then exit to view our handwork. The entire building and those around it have disappeared and nothing can be seen except for a huge dust cloud rising into the sky and spreading over the remains of the small city. We’ll have to wait until morning to investigate the remains.

We camp on the roof for the night with the dust cloud from the destroyed buildings slowly settling on us. We watch and wait, checking our scanners and peering into the night with our field glasses. We can see no red dots anywhere and except for an occasional sneeze from the dust, we hear nothing all night.

At first light we patrol down and out of the building and toward the destroyed structures. Dead mutants lie everywhere, killed by the blast. The few that must have survived have fled for we see no signs of anything moving and no dots on the scanners.

We reach the crater site and patrol down into it. There are more and more dead mutants and something curious, the mutants are getting smaller. I find one that is mostly intact and trapped under the debris.

The mutant is short, no more than a meter tall and less than half the size of the ones we normally encounter. We patrol further toward the centre and find a large area that has caved in. The building must have

had a huge underground area hidden from sight and we patrol down into the pit, covering our arcs and watching for mutants.

We reach the centre of the pit and find the remains of a massive mutant. Even with the direct strike of the missile on the building, it obviously wasn't killed outright. But the several hundred tons of concrete and steel lying on its head have finished it and it lies half in and half out of the pit it was trying to escape from with the walls collapsed on top of it and pinning it to the ground before finally crushing it.

The thing is massive, fully ten meters high and almost as big around as it is tall. Its legs have withered away but its arms have grown in proportion and are now huge, easily a meter around.

"Keep watch. I'm going to investigate closer," I tell the team as I move closer to investigate the monster.

A call comes from Steve. "I'm getting scanner blips," he calls.

I glance at my scanner. The blips are coming from the monster. "Do your blips look they are coming from that thing?" I ask him.

"Yeah," replies Steve.

I move closer. The enormous body towers over me and as I touch it, it moves. It's moving from the inside!

"Back, get back!" I call on the radio. "The mutants are inside it."

As we move back, away from the monster a head appears and then the body of a small mutant. The mutant is emerging from a slit in the belly of the monster. The thing is giving birth! We watch in horror as the mutant appears, and already it's a meter tall.

At the sight of us, it howls and starts to run towards us. I target and fire, shooting its head off and it flops lifeless on the rubble. It seemed like a good time for a head shot and I want to take the body with us for the scientists to examine. We back away as the monster moves again. The belly shakes as another head appears in the slit.

"Maybe not," I think. There is no way of knowing how many are still in there, and the shot I fired will bring more from the surrounding city. It's time to do as a shepherd does and get the flock out of here.

"Move back! Let's get out of here before we end up in mutant central," I radio. We patrol out of the crater, weapons up and even more alert than usual. Behind us there are screams and howls and the sound of mutants fighting over the dead starts to fill the air. Red dots start appearing on our scanners and all are heading for where the monster lies.

We patrol out of the crater and head for the truck, moving fast. I am on the radio that Cheryl carries, explaining what we have found and the voice on the other end is not happy.

"You f**ing mutes can't f**ing do anything they don't f**ing breed get back in there and kill them. We've already blown up the f**ing building for you now finish the f**ing job and clean up."

Well, now we have to go back, but I do have a choice in how I do it. The mutants will be busy fighting over the dead in the crater and with luck they are eating the monster. The cameras in our suits that record everything will validate our story and I decide on a drive-by shooting, something I'd seen in a movie on the Net.

We reach the dubious safety of the truck, and I explain my plan to the rest of my team.

"Steve is driving. We're going to drive through the town. Cheryl left front, Rick right front, Joe left rear, Brian right rear. I'm going to bail out about 200 metres from the crater, and I want you guys to provide a nice distraction and lead the mutants on a merry chase around town while I get a tissue sample from the big guy."

"I'll run in, get the sample and head back to where you dropped me off and radio you when I'm ready for a pickup. Fully automatic anytime you like. We have enough ammunition in this thing for a ten-day patrol, and we don't have to worry about ammunition counts."

"We kill anything we see and then we head for home. Everyone good?" I wait.

It's a dumb plan. My chances of getting in and out without a mutant becoming interested in me are remote at best. Then again, the mutants do tend to get single-minded about things and maybe the truck will provide a nice distraction.

"It's a dumb plan. You'll get your arse eaten, but it's your arse. Let's do it," grins Rick.

We climb into the truck and check our weapons and feeds. I check that my knife is in position and put the main clip on my weapon and the second one on my belt. I won't take the big backpack, just two of the 200 round clips. "Let's go," I order.

Steve drives out while the rest of the team take positions on the truck. The scanner in the dashboard starts glowing with red dots as we near the crater and 200 metres from the crater, Steve slows down. I roll out the back of the truck, cradling my weapon, come up and run for the cover of the building nearest me. I kneel by the building and watch the truck speed up as it heads away from me.

I listen to the whine of the truck fading as it races away and then the truck's siren starts up. Steve must have figured the more noise the better. Then there's the whump of the weapons and the howls and screams of the mutants as they chase after the truck and their idea of meals on wheels.

I patrol to the corner of the building. The scanner on my wrist shows red dots moving away from me. I run for the crater edge where I stop and check for any dots. There are only the red dots in the centre of the crater where the monster is.

I patrol quickly down into the crater and approach the monster's crushed head, away from the birth canal. I check the scanner again. There are red dots moving around the edge of the crater, but none of them are heading for me.

I put my weapon down, draw my combat knife and start cutting at the flesh. It stinks. It stinks of rancid, rotting meat and it's tough, really tough. I'm having a hard time cutting it and these knives are not exactly blunt.

I check the scanner again. Still no dots. Cut and hack, cut and hack, until finally I have a piece of the flesh about the size of my hand. I drop it in the pocket of my combat pants, wishing I had thought to bring an empty ration pack to put the sample in.

I take up my weapon and check the scanner. There are red dots moving around the edge of the crater. I patrol away from the monster and up to the crater lip, calling the truck on the comm unit as I go.

"I'm out and heading for the pickup point," I whisper into the comm unit.

"Roger that," comes Steve's reply.

There is a howl from behind me, and I look back and see a mutant heading for me. I turn, kneel, and drop it and the two that are following. Up and sprint for the building where the team will pick me up, checking the scanner on the run.

There are more red dots coming up fast behind me. I stop, turn, and drop the ones following me. Only six. Up and run for the building. I can hear the truck coming and the angry howls and screams of the frustrated mutants chasing it.

I run down the street and glance back at more mutants and the truck racing towards me in the distance. I turn and drop to my knee with my weapon on automatic and empty the clip at the mutants pursuing me.

The truck is getting closer. I can see the flashes from weapons now. I turn and run, changing the weapon clip as I go and discarding the empty one.

Behind me, I can hear the truck closing on me. I glance over my shoulder at the mutants chasing the truck. They're about fifty metres behind and closing. The truck pulls alongside me, and I throw the

weapon in, reach for the pole on the rear and heave myself in, tumbling onto the equipment as the fusion motor roars and the truck speeds up.

I'm lying prone on my back. Cheryl glances down at me and then back to the mutants she's firing on. Her radio crackles in my ear.

"Hey boss, when you're finished with your nap, want to lend a hand?" she laughs.

The rest of the team laugh with her, and I climb to my feet, swaying as the truck rounds a corner.

"Well, I guess I'd better, otherwise we'll never get home," I reply. I load my weapon from the belt feed lying on the floor and lend a hand. We leave the mutants screaming and howling behind us, as Steve speeds out of town.

We travel all night and although I didn't manage to get one of the little mutants as planned, I have no problems with the orders to finish them all off. We can never be certain that we've fully cleared an area anyway and my team has certainly put a dent in the mutant numbers. I don't feel as though I haven't complied with our orders and the protocols in my head aren't complaining.

We reach the compound late in the afternoon and I report to General Adam. I grimace as I walk into the General's office. Doctor Mathews is there waiting for me as well. This is not going to be the usual debrief.

While the techs download the video stream from the suit, I stand at the end of the long table while General Richard and Doctor Mathews silently review the footage.

The medical team have taken away the flesh sample that I'd finally put in an empty ration bag to the science lab. My combat suit still stinks though. I hope I can convince the armoury to give me a new one.

General Richard and Doctor Mathews finally look up from the screens where they reviewed the camera footage.

"Well, Jaina. Good work with the sample. It would appear at first glance that the mutants have gained some sort of ability to breed. Why don't you give us your thoughts?" asks General Richard.

I spend the next hour reporting what we found. How tough the flesh was, the way the little ones kept appearing even though the monster had been dead for at least six hours, the time between the air strike and our finding it. The toughness of the monster and the lack of damage to it from the missile strike seemed to concern them and they spend a lot of time asking the same questions in different ways. Yes, it's tough, and no, there was no sign of damage by the missile strike.

They finally stop asking questions, well, the same question. After a few minutes silence, I ask, "Have these been seen anywhere else?"

Doctor Mathews looks at General Richard, who shrugs and grimaces.

"There are reports from various teams around the world that mutant numbers are increasing without any identifiable means of doing so. Up until now, we thought the only way the mutants could spread was via the mutation and controlling the problem was just a matter of wiping out the mutant population. Now, it seems the mutants can breed and controlling them just got a whole lot more difficult," replies Doctor Mathews.

They ask me a few more questions and I'm acutely aware of the cameras recording the debriefing. Along with Doctor Mathews presence, the cameras are also not typical for a debrief session.

Finally dismissed, I head for the armoury to ask for a new combat suit. The smell is definitely getting worse. I find the armourer and beg a new suit from him. With the arguments and haggling he put up, I begin to think he had to hand-sew them himself, but after hanging around him for a while he throws a new suit at me and tells me to get out.

As I leave the armoury and head to the showers, I catch sight of him spraying something in the air.

Even showered and clean, I can still smell the stink from the mutant. I throw my old suit in the incinerator. People are avoiding me, and I eat my meal in the corner away from everyone, before finally heading for my camp.

"Jezus, boss!" exclaims Ric. "You're not really sleeping here tonight, are you?"

"You are on the nose," sniffs Brian.

"Yeah, definitely," agrees Cheryl, waving her hands in front of her face.

"Okay, okay, I'll sleep in the exercise yard," I exclaim.

I grab Hermi and my blanket and head for the exercise yard. "At least I won't have to listen to you lot snoring!" I yell at them.

My leg has itched all night and come morning, I go to the medical centre to find one of the medical staff and explain the problem.

"It's been itching all night and it's driving me nuts," I tell him.

"Well, let's have a look," he sighs, probably thinking just another whining HK.

I drop the suit on the ground. The area on my leg beneath where the flesh was in my pocket has blisters and pus oozing from it.

"Holy cow, that's not good!" he exclaims, turning away from me and grabbing a mask. "I'll be right back," he yells over his shoulder as he rushes out the door, gagging and almost retching.

Five minutes later, the entire medical team, all five of them and Doctor Mathews are looking at my leg. They're all wearing biohazard suits. I can't hear what they're saying, but they look worried.

I look at my leg. "Well, there goes my perfect skin complexion," I giggle.

I'm starting to feel light-headed and sweaty, and I lie there waiting as they do their medical thing. They take samples of the pus and samples of my skin, and I yelp and flinch when they start to scrape the top part of the mess away. One of them hands me a comm unit.

"Do you want a painkiller, Jaina?" I hear him ask in the radio.

"If you're going to dig that out, yeah," I reply. The doctor nods and one of the staff puts a needle in the back of my hand.

I wake up and sniff the air. At least the smell is gone, and goo fills the large hole in my leg. I can see new flesh growing already and it itches.

One of the medical techs comes in. "Hi, Jaina, how are you feeling?" he asks.

"Yeah, fine, thanks," I reply.

"We took out a sizable chunk of your leg. It was slowly being eaten away," he explains. "Anyway, we've sent it to another lab along with your other sample," he explains, spooning more goo onto my leg.

"I'll get a meal sent along for you. You should be good to leave by tonight," he informs me.

"Thanks," I reply. I lean back on the pillows. Oh well, another day in a comfortable bed. Could be worse I think to myself with a smile.

That night, I leave the medical centre and the next day all our patrols are cancelled and all the teams on patrol are recalled back to the compound. Nobody knows what's going on and we're ordered not to leave the compound. Apart from our patrols, we never do anyway as we have nowhere else to go.

A week goes by and then two weeks. We have no patrols at all and everyone is bored. I discover gymnastics on the Net and decide to try that out while we have nothing to do.

By the end of the second week, all the HKs have taken to working out in the exercise yard by beating each other up. We have a whole round robin competition going on to see who can last the longest before they

pass out or are knocked out. It's just stupid fun but at least it gives us something to do.

As a group, we discover something curious, and it changes the whole dynamic of the competition. The men are stronger and hit harder, but the women are faster and harder to hit. The men will throw a punch and hit air, while the women duck in for a quick one-two. It's hugely funny to watch the men flail around trying to hit this ducking, weaving, annoying nuisance. Of course, if the men land a good punch in the right place, the women are down for the count, but the hits they land are largely body or back. On the men's part, it comes down to skill and luck to land a blow that decks us, and we seem evenly matched. Speed vs strength.

The morning of the third week of boredom, I wake to the sound of large heavy aircraft landing. With the rest of my team, I stand and watch the two planes, nicknamed MacJet's, land outside the compound.

The MacJet is a huge slab of an aircraft capable of carrying enormous cargoes, vertical take-off and supersonic flight. The MacJet's are sealed and not pressurised like traditional aircraft and are even capable of short space flight. Fusion-powered, their design comes from the shuttle craft used by the Earth's alien guests, the Gorkn.

We gather in the compound, curious to know what is going on. General Adam makes an appearance in front of the briefing hut, and we gather to hear him and find out what is happening.

"People, we are moving out of here and everything goes. Two hours to move it. That's all." He turns and disappears back inside the briefing hut. So much for finding out what's going on.

The aircraft crew and cargo loaders are driving out of the planes with forklifts and small mobile cranes. Techs are already starting to remove equipment and supplies from the armoury. I turn and along with a lot of the other HKs, head for the mess hall. Better get breakfast into me before the mess hall disappears.

Two hours later, the compound is gone. All that remains is some litter and the exercise equipment. I have Hermi in my pocket and my helmet

in my hand as we troop aboard the MacJet.

This is no ordinary compound move. Normally we move the compounds by truck and convoy. We have rarely relocated a compound by air before.

I find a place to sit in the huge plane surrounded by all our equipment. The cargo door closes, and only interior lights shine. There is a slight feeling of acceleration as the plane lifts off. Built with Gorkn technology, the MacJet even has artificial gravity and inertia dampening. I barely feel the effects of the plane accelerating and manoeuvring as it carries us away.

The invasion.

Two hours of flight time another jolt as the plane lands. The cargo doors open, letting a bitterly cold wind blow in. Through the open cargo doors, I see flurries of snow blow through huge hangar doors that are slowly closing after allowing the MacJet in.

We troop out of the plane and assemble by the tail where we chat about what is happening and wait to be told what to do.

I look around at the group of HKs. Eighty-six of us. Our numbers have dwindled significantly in the months we have fought. The medical, technical and support staff are in the other plane. While I can see the plane, there's no sign of them and despite the group of HKs I'm part of, I feel alone without them.

The hangar is enormous and there are six of the huge MacJets parked in here with room to spare. Men and women drive forklifts and move huge cargoes around as they unload the MacJets.

There are scuttling robots darting through the chaos moving equipment and other groups like ours assembling by the planes they are exiting. I stand and wait, shivering with the cold along with everyone else. It's cold, ice cold. Like Arctic cold, maybe?

A man next to me nudges me and points to an approaching officer. We watch him duck and weave his way through the unloading going on around us.

"Follow me and no talking," the officer orders as he reaches us.

We fall in behind him, forming up in two rows that snake through the mad house of the unloading process.

Several staircases lead us to corridors and corridors of accommodation. The officer starts allocating names and numbers and everyone gets a personal room. I enter mine and look around.

The room is small, about five meters long and three meters wide, with a bunk against the wall, a latrine and shower in the corner, and a square receptacle in the wall with nothing in it. I double-check the hole in the

wall. Yep, empty. The light for the room comes from glowing tubes recessed in the roof.

I sit on my bunk and wait. At least the bunk feels comfortable, although I don't much care for the room. Like the mutants, I don't like small rooms very much.

I wait. I lie down and get Hermi out. There's no signal reception. Well, that sucks, not even the Net to amuse me. I'm getting hungry and still I wait. To make matters worse, now I'm bored.

A voice from the wall speaks at last. "All HKs, report to the main briefing room. Follow the green arrows on the floor."

"Finally," I mutter. Dinner would be nice too. I get up from the bunk, leave the little room and follow the green arrows that glow on the floor to show me where to go.

Up and down the corridor, dozens and dozens of men and women are all exiting their rooms. Everyone is dressed alike in the black glittering combat suit.

Along with them, I follow the arrows through corridor after corridor and come eventually to a large hall, where I take a seat while still more people dressed in the glittering suit arrive. They keep coming and the room slowly starts to fill.

I look around the big room which is capable of easily seating 10,000 people. A podium stands alone on the stage in front of the seats and the doors close as the HKs stop coming in.

The room is only about a quarter full, maybe two thousand people in total. It doesn't seem many, considering the number of people it's obviously intended for.

Silence falls as we settle and an elderly man in a military uniform walk slowly to the podium. He stops and looks out over us, studying us briefly before he begins to speak in a quiet, even voice.

"Good afternoon, everyone. My name is General Alexa Peternon. I am the Commander-in-Chief of the world joint forces operation tasked with

the control of the mutant population. The World Armed Forces are aware of the new developments regarding the mutants and in case not everyone has heard, we have evidence the mutants are capable of breeding," announces General Peternon.

On the screen behind General Peternon, a picture appears of the mutant breeder my team and I found along with video footage of the little mutants emerging from the breeder.

"This new development means the original Mutant Control program cannot be successful and as a result the current eradication program has been cancelled," continues General Peternon, as a meter tall baby mutant emerges from the slit in the monster's belly.

I can't help but wonder, are we being cancelled along with the program?

"The World Armed Forces have instead developed a new mission profile and have tasked us with seeing it completed. The program is highly aggressive and will also mean the removal of any non-redeveloped personnel from the operation," General Peternon continues.

Hmmm, I guess this is a nice way of saying it's mute against mute.

"Your orders will come directly from Thedra and only from Thedra, the controlling computer of this complex. You obey only orders from Thedra. You report directly and only to Thedra. No other orders exist. No other control exists. You obey only Thedra," orders General Peternon.

There is a sharp momentary pain in my head. It disappears as quickly as it came and as the pain fades, I realise these orders cancel the protocol to obey human orders. One of our core control protocols has just been cancelled by nothing more than a few words. It also explains why we will be working from a completely automated complex, no humans to get in our way. I look around at those closest to me and see the same surprised look on their faces. I wonder briefly if that means I can kill humans now, but a sharp pain in my head confirms that control is still there, like a snake waiting to strike at one wrong move.

“Your operational requirements will be provided by the automated systems controlled by Thedra. This complex is secure from mutant attack. The surrounding countryside is not only isolated, but also at a permanent minus 20 degrees. You have one month to clear a continent and make it secure. If you are not successful within that time…” General Peternon pauses, “… alternative measures have been planned and authorised.”

General Peternon looks out over us, as if for the last time.

“Thank you and good luck,” he announces.

He turns and slowly leaves the stage. He is an old man, and I get the impression he isn’t certain about his own future, let alone ours.

A new voice speaks to us, deep, toneless and without emotion.

“All personnel are to follow the green arrows to the mess hall,” the voice announces.

We leave the room and follow the arrows. Dinner is served and I’m starving.

Dinner, food, yum. I queue with the rest of the HKs and catch up with my team. We are all busy talking and speculating on how we can possibly clear an entire continent in a month.

We finish our meal and ask each other, “Now what?” The computer hasn’t said what to do next. Should we return to our rooms? I doubt I can find my way through the maze of corridors without the arrows to follow.

While we wait, we discuss our support personnel. Where they are and what happened to them. If nothing else, I would have liked to say goodbye to Doctor Mathews.

The computer finally comes back on. “All HK personnel report to the medical centre. Follow the green arrows,” orders the voice. No kidding. Got any other colour besides green?

We make our way to the medical centre and queue up with everyone else. A long, two-headed snaking column of black combat suits. The

queue moves slowly forward, and the medical staff guide us into curtained-off sections.

My turn comes and as I'm about to enter a curtained section, I catch sight of Doctor Mathews near the back of the room. I turn and head toward her.

"Hey, in here, soldier!" snaps a voice behind me.

I look over my shoulder at the officer and grin at him. "Get the next one. Mine is up here," I retort. Awesome! I didn't have to obey him.

I head for the doctor and wait for her to finish with the soldier inside. As the HK she's working on leaves, I duck into the cubicle. "Doctor Mathews, I'm so glad to see you," I exclaim.

"Jaina!" she exclaims as she hugs me. It is something I've never done before. Her arms go around me, and I suddenly feel warm and safe. It's the strangest feeling.

Doctor Mathews releases me. "You'd better get on the table," she orders.

"What's going on?" I ask, as she busies herself with her equipment. A long thin syringe with a tiny computer chip in a saline solution. Another syringe with a clear saline solution, a scalpel, and a block of what looks like steel all rest on a surgical tray. Block of steel. Weird thing to have in a surgical room.

Doctor Mathews turns back to me, "You're getting a microchip in your head. It will go in through your eardrum and there will be a slight pain as your eardrum breaks. The microchip will allow Thedra to hear everything you do and let her communicate with you," she explains. "After that, I need to strap this block of adacorium to your arm. You're getting upgrades," explains Doctor Mathews.

I'd never heard of adacorium. "What's adacorium?" I ask.

"It's an alloy created by the Gorkn and is normally used for the hull of their starship. It's extremely strong and very expensive to make," Doctor

Mathews explains.

"So why are you strapping it to my arm?" I shrug.

"We have some new nanobots for you. These ones will replace your existing ones and they're able to work with adacorium. In fact, these nanobots manufacture the adacorium and then re-work it to become the ship hull plating. In your case, we've told the nanobots to do something a little different with it," explains Doctor Mathews.

"How different?" I ask, not sure I like where this is going.

"I'm so sorry, but they're going to coat your entire bone structure with it. Once the nanobots finish doing that, you'll be able to withstand far greater damage than what you can now. When the nanobots finish working the adacorium, they'll take over the task of helping to repair any damage you take. You're being sent to die, and they don't expect any of you to survive," Doctor Mathews explains.

I look up at her. She has tears in her eyes, and I suddenly feel very protective of her. I reach over and take her hand to hold it.

"Hey, don't worry about me. I always survive." I grin.

Doctor Mathews shakes her head. "Yeah, and when you get back, send me an email on Hermi," she replies with a sad smile.

She injects the needle of new nanobots into my arm and makes a long incision on my arm. Over the cut on my arm, she straps the block of adacorium tightly to it.

"Here, take this when you get back to your room," Doctor Mathews says, handing me a small pillbox.

"Thank you, Doctor Mathews, for everything," I tell her. "Out of curiosity, what's your first name? I've never known."

"It's Jane," she replies. I get up from the table and get another hug from her.

"Thank you, Jane," I whisper as I leave the curtained-off room. I glance back and see her watching me as I walk out the door. She gives a little wave and a smile and turns back to the surgical table for the next HK.

A voice whispers in my head. *Turn left, turn right, turn left.* There are more HKs in front of and behind me, all following the voice in their head. Like me, they all have a tightly bandaged arm and a small pillbox in their hand.

I follow the voice in my head until I find my cubicle. There's a glass of water in the receptacle and I swallow the contents of the pillbox with the water. I feel itchy and scratchy, as if something's inside me making me feel uncomfortable. I sit on the bed and sigh. I feel out of sorts. I lie down, close my eyes, and try to sleep.

There's a voice in my head telling me to wake up. It's quite persistent and very annoying. It stops when I sit up. The bandage on my arm is loose and the block of metal has disappeared. Even the wound in my arm has healed and disappeared. I guess the adacorium now coats the bones in my body.

There's a meal in the receptacle in the wall and I sit on the bed eating it and tapping myself on the head. Nope, still sounds the same, despite the reinforcing.

The voice in my head whispers to me and I follow its directions to the hangar. We are all gathering there, two thousand black-suited HKs. I look for my team, but I can't see them anywhere. It would have been nice to hear the silly jokes Rick recites from the TV shows he watches.

The voice in our head tells us to watch the screen and everyone turns to watch the giant projection screen on the wall. There is a weapon slowly rotating on the screen, with the code name HKF33 (Hunter/Killer Fusion model 33) and according to the specs beside it, it is custom made for us.

The voice informs us it's our new weapon and then goes on to explain the weapon's specs and operations. It uses a miniature fusion reactor to create and fire rounds. The weapon holds a block of metal in the butt

that is slowly consumed as we fire it. The block of metal, the ammunition block, can supply 5000 rounds before depletion. It sounds like an enormous improvement over our previous weapon's capacity. The weapon cannot jam, has no moving parts, and does not require cooling as the only heat comes from the projectile moving down the barrel.

I'm dubious about it. I've tried out high-tech weapons before. The silly laser guns and plasma rifles, they all failed quickly due to their complexity. I'd decided early on that simple was good. There's nothing like a nice, simple weapon going whump and making a nice big hole in a mutant. I like the old military KISS adage. Keep It Simple Stupid. And from the comments around me, I guess many of the other HKs feel the same way, although it doesn't look like we have any choice in the matter.

The target objective comes next. A geo map of Australia replaces the image of the weapon. It's the target continent we are to clear. The voice in our head informs us that the island continent of Australia is our target and explains the choice.

Australia is isolated and relatively flat with few mountains and none that are of any significance. Once we have cleared it and made it secure, it will remain that way as naval and satellite patrols will secure the oceans around it. Once we have secured the island continent, the patrolling ships and aircraft will handle any unauthorised approach using extreme measures, a term that I guess means blown out of the water and/or air.

The voice is now explaining the invasion plan. Target and sweep lines appear on the map on the screen. We will land in two groups on the northwest coast of the continent. The first group will clear the immediate area and secure it while MacJets return with the second group.

We will be using flight platforms. A flight platform is a hovering disc with a cage that reaches to our waist and a belt with rigid arms that secures the rider to the cage. The rider uses their weight to manoeuvre the platform by leaning forward, back, sideways. The whole thing leaves our hands free to operate our weapons.

We are to spread out over a sweeping front approximately six hundred kilometres long and maintain a three-hundred-metre separation. The entire line will sweep over the country in overlapping runs, and we kill any mutant in our arc.

The whole operation will be coordinated by Thedra using a brand-new network of thousands of meter square, orbiting micro-satellites in close Earth orbit to track the mutants, us, and anything else on the ground. As our sweep progresses, ships in the Pacific and Indian oceans will target any large-scale mutant infestations detected by satellite and deploy tactical nuclear weapons against them.

I briefly wonder what the local population thinks about all this, because it doesn't look like there's going to be a lot of consideration for them.

The voice (I'm starting to think of it as The Voice) directs us to our aircraft while the second team returns to their quarters. I follow the voice's instructions with the rest of the first strike team and head to the waiting MacJet and board it. All our equipment and 250 of us is to be packed into each plane. The MacJet is big but it's still standing room only.

I feel a jolt as the plane starts moving and another slight jolt as it goes supersonic. An hour and a half later, I leave the cool of the MacJet cargo hold for the searing, blistering heat of northwest Australia.

Hot, hot, hot. Whose idea was this? The distant red hills shimmer and rocks are cracking from the baking heat. Nothing living moves. Even the grass is dead, large spiky round mounds of it. Black suits and a blazing sun and 40 degrees Centigrade in the shade, stupid computers.

We have new weapons, new suits, and new helmets. At least the helmets are sort of an improvement. Electronic targeting, direction finder, compass, digital zoom, distance tracking, target counters, tri-channel radio, and satellite comms. It's another high-tech gadget and another thing to go wrong. The heat is making me cranky, and I don't like the flying platform. Once I'm on it, I'm stuck there.

I deploy with the rest of the HKs, following the instructions of the voice and the little direction arrows in the helmet which point me to where I have to go. I have general radio coverage, and I can hear lots of muttering and complaints.

I'm not very happy myself. I'm trapped in a flying buzz bee with a high-tech helmet and a weapon I consider untested. All being remote controlled by a computer, and it's hot.

I'm sweating and definitely cranky. I try out the weapon on an innocent but deadly tree. A poor old withered dried out thing. The tree falls over nicely from the impact of the round. It doesn't make me feel any better though.

We disperse up and down the coast, spreading out and following the arrows in the helmet displays. The first group heads to the outer edges and the second group fills in the middle. I reach my designated position, and I see two figures on either side of me about 300 metres away.

When I've stopped, it gets hotter, and I start flying around in small circles trying to create some breeze. The voice in my head tells me to hold position. I tell the voice it's too hot and at least I have some breeze flying around. I absently note that I'm not compelled to automatically obey the voice. The thought doesn't make me any less cranky.

I wait on the flying platform in the blazing sun. Sweat drips down my face inside the helmet and it makes me feel uncomfortable and even more annoyed. I lift the helmet up and drink some water. If it's possible, the sun actually feels hotter with my helmet up. I have another three hours before the next group gets to the deployment zone and then probably another thirty minutes before, they're ready to deploy. Just wonderful, not!

More water. Flies buzz around me but can't get to me. Typical. The only moving things in this hell pit are annoying little black insects. There's a rock looking at me funny. I shoot it and the one beside it for complaining.

Finally, green arrows in my helmet display light up. The voice whispers in my ear and we commence our sweep. At least the breeze will cool me down. I fly along trapped on the annoying flight disc. Hot, sweaty, and I already stink. The smell of my own sweat fills the helmet. It's really hot and boring. All I need to do is watch for red dots on the helmet scanner, target and shoot them. It must be too hot even for the mutants because I don't see any for hours.

OMFG how big is this country? I finally give in and swear. I've been flying for four hours now. At 200km/hour, we cover a lot of ground fast and we're still on the first sweep.

I try to remember how big this place is so I can figure out how long it will take. I can't remember and give up. It's too hot to think anyway and at least it's getting cooler as we head south.

There is chatter on the radio as mutants are found and fired on. Several pop up in my arc and I drop them quick. At this speed, I don't have a lot of time to target and fire. Our speed drops the further south we get. More and more mutants appear up and down the line as we near areas that once had high populations. The entire line is slowing down to clear the high mutant population areas.

Up and down, up and down, up and down, day after night after day. We get ten-minute rest breaks every eight hours. Groups of a hundred of us congregate on a MacJet and resupply. At each break, I get out of the little flying disc and stretch my legs, grab more water, rations and ammunition blocks for my weapon, and get back on and go back to my position. There is no rest and no stopping.

After a week of this, we are almost halfway across the continent and there's a big city coming up with low mountains to the east and the sea to the west.

We hit the city just on dusk and the mutant population is huge. There are continuous contacts and people are flying everywhere. In and around high-rise buildings and skyscrapers. It's dangerous flying around in the

city, trying to navigate, target, fire and avoid the mutants all at the same time.

There are many crashes with discs flying into buildings and mutants pulling the discs down when they drop too low. The robots come from the MacJet, collect the wounded and dead, and take them back to the MacJet for repair and redeployment. It takes us the best part of eight hours to sweep the city before no more red dots appear on the scanner.

Then the sweep resumes, up and down, up and down, day in and day out. Finally, two weeks after we started, we are nearing the primary farming and agriculture areas of the country along with the main cities on the east coast.

As we hit the more populous east coast and farming regions, our speed drops lower and lower as large numbers of mutants are engaged. The line of the sweep changes, angling down towards the centre of the continent. We are literally sweeping the mutants toward the coast.

I notice something of interest. The mutants are running from us. Normally they just spot lunch, head in and keep coming and coming, until either they reach their lunch, or they die. Now the mutants are actively avoiding us or if it's a large pack, they attack the disc.

They leap over each other to get to the disc, pull it out of the air and kill the rider by ripping the rider to pieces as the rider tries to fight while trapped in the cage on the disc. Even our new improved adacorium-coated bones don't help when they're torn out of the socket, or the skin and muscle is ripped away.

On a number of occasions, I find the mutants start to engage and then break away from the heavy fire. I'm not the only one to notice. There are comments on the general link up and down the line about the strange mutant behaviour.

It's taken three weeks to cross the continent. Everyone is exhausted and run down and the continuous flying and standing has taken a heavy toll on us.

Accidents have happened. People have flown into the sides of buildings and bridges. Others have just passed out from exhaustion and smashed into the ground and mutants have taken out those too close to the ground.

Trapped in the disc, there is no escape if the mutants pull it down. There are no medical teams to pick us up, only the robots. We are on our own with only the voice in our head driving us.

A disc to my right smashes into a bridge and a MacJet lands nearby. The robots come buzzing out, retrieve the body and disappear back into the MacJet. If the HK lives, they'll pack the wounds with goo, rehydrate them and send them back out. There are a lot of wounded HKs flying.

We are nearly at the end, on a downward sweep heading south along the coast. We've already been through several smaller cities, but now we are nearing one of the main cities on the east coast on the southward sweep. The city was once heavily populated and massive skyscrapers line the skyline. We hit the outer suburbs and work our way in.

We've been driving the mutants towards the sea, those that escape from us anyway. The mutants have been running from us for a while and now they are jam-packed into the city, hundreds of thousands of them and we fly straight into it.

The first large city fight was bad enough and in comparison, that was a relatively small, open city. This time it's a disaster.

The narrow streets make the flying discs a nightmare. We are smashing into buildings while trying to target and fly at the same time. The mutants are running, screaming, and leaping at the discs and dragging them down. Fire and target acquisition is out the window and there are no covering arcs to keep each other safe. We are busy targeting mutants in front while more are coming from our flanks.

I'm flying low down a long street, mutants in front. Target, fire, target, fire. I watch as a disc is pulled from the air in front of me and it disappears in a blur of mutant anger. I fire on the mutants that are pulling the disc down, but by the time the mutants attacking the disc are

dead, it's smashed into the side of a building and the HK still trapped in the disc, has been torn to shreds.

I think to myself, "This is turning into a killing field, ours." I hear more discs smashing into the buildings. The waves of mutants are getting thicker and coming in faster. I slow my disc to a halt, hovering and firing as a wall of angry mutants comes rampaging down the street.

Two more discs stop beside me and are firing on the wall of mutants. Then there are three, and soon six of us, grouped up and firing on the incoming mutant wall.

I get on the radio. "Jaina on centre, five with me switch to channel 1090." Before I change channel, I yell on the general channel, "Team up, team up, make teams!"

The voice comes over. "Denied, denied, continue with patrol."

I yell on general again so everyone can hear, "Listen, you stupid computer, shut up! This is what we do!"

I change my radio channel to my new group. "Cover arcs, you know what to do. I'm Jaina on centre."

I hear the general chatter go quiet as people start dropping out, forming teams, and covering themselves. I announce on general, "This is Jaina. I'm ditching the death disc."

I hear clicks of acknowledgements and switch back to my team. "Lose the disc. Let's do this our way, the safe way," I tell them.

"Roger."

"KK."

And we are on the ground. It never felt so good.

I signal patrol down the street, and we kneel and take the wall of mutants heading for us. Six weapons are going non-stop and still the mutants come. There's no point backing away, we'll lose weapon stability as we move. Better to stand and fight. Then the mutants break and run screaming and howling down another street.

I sort out my new team. I don't have time for names, just positions. Everyone checks weapons and changes their ammunition blocks. I jump back on general.

"This is Jaina, on foot and patrolling toward the centre," I announce, getting more clicks and acknowledgements in reply.

We patrol in through the city, previously known as Brisbane. My new team fights and mutants die as we move closer to the centre of the city.

Teams appear on street corners and the mutants flee before us as we push closer and closer to the centre of the city, forcing the mutants back.

The teams are now groups of teams and as the mutants' surge out running at us, the firing weapons drive them back. The mutants howl and scream as they swarm away from us. The weapons hurt and they know it now, but eventually they'll come rushing and overwhelm us.

We reach the centre of the city, a massive grass park. The area swarms with angry mutants, climbing over each other and trying to stay out of range of our weapons. The sweep line has come together and surrounded them, and we hold them with weapon fire.

On general I announce, "This is Jaina, hold at the perimeter. I'm calling in an airstrike."

I move back from the front, taking the little field computer from a trouser pocket and pulling up the overlay and map co-ordinates. I touch my finger here and here and transmit the strike command.

No signal! I move back a bit more, further from the front, looking for a signal to the satellites. The buildings are blocking it. Even the voice has disappeared.

"This is Jaina. I have signal loss. Hold perimeter, I'll try further back." More clicks and acknowledgements.

I sprint like a demon down the road. The mutants will hold still only so long before making a serious rush at the perimeter. I ditch my weapon so I can run faster, watching the computer in my hand as I sprint and muttering, "Signal, signal, signal, come on, come on!"

The voice is still quiet, then... Found it. Five hundred metres, at a square with a fountain in the middle.

I ask on general, “We still good for strike? Confirm.”

I get a hundred voices all yelling, “Call it now!”

I hit the transmit button. The acknowledgment comes, 30 seconds to impact. I call the time to impact: “30 seconds to impact... 10 seconds, take cover... 5,4,3,2,1.” A blazing sun lights the sky, I fly backwards into the fountain, the world comes crashing down on my head, and everything goes dark.

I AM NOT HAVING A GOOD DAY.

There's fizzing, popping and the smell of burning flesh. I sit up choking and coughing from the stinking, mouldy water I lie in. My helmet is smoking from the shorted electronics, and I tear it off my head. Rubble lies all around and over me, and a faint light comes from cracks in the rubble. What the hell happened?

I try the radio. No reply, and start to crawl out from under the rubble, heading for a bright patch in the distance. My eyes are watering and burning and everything is hazy and blurry. I crawl out through a hole in the wall that had collapsed on the fountain. The fountain saved me. The collapsing wall cracked around it and crushed the monument in the centre of the square, leaving enough space in the water for me.

Through blurry eyes, I look around me. There's dust and debris everywhere. I can't see anything in the direction the park where the mutants and the rest of the teams are. Whatever weapon was deployed, was far too powerful. I try the radio again, but still nothing. I try the voice.

"Thedra, you there?" I ask aloud.

I'm not sure how to contact the computer but I figure that since I can hear her, she must be able to hear me. After all, she'd tried to stop the team formations.

"Yes, Jaina, I hear you," replies the toneless voice in my head.

"What happened?" I demand.

"You called for a missile strike. I calculated the best device would be a small nuclear weapon. One was deployed from the destroyer off the coast," replies the toneless voice.

"What?" I yell. "That's not what I put on the targeting computer!"

"I know that, but I considered your decision inappropriate. The number of mutants contained in the area exceeded three quarters of a million. A nuclear device ensured the destruction of the mutant targets within the project parameters," replies the voice.

“What about the rest of the teams? Where are they?” I ask.

“There were a number of casualties from the blast. They were considered an acceptable loss beside the number of mutants destroyed,” replies the voice.

I’m speechless. Has the entire Hunter/Killer group just been wiped out because the computer thought the losses were acceptable? I need to sort this out, later. For now, I need to get clear of the area. If there are any other HKs alive, they’ll be doing the same thing. I don’t know if the radiation will kill me or just make me sick, but in either case, I’m better off out of here.

I still can’t see properly. Everything is hazy and blurry, but I start running anyway, away from the blast area. As I run, I try to remember what the small TND parameters are. Something about 800 metres for lethal radiation dose and 1000 metres for acute or something. I was sheltered from direct exposure by the buildings and the fountain. Have I suffered a lethal dose of radiation or not? I don’t know. I run and the radio remains completely silent.

I stop running at one of the crashed flying discs. The driver is dead. A jutting length of steel has ripped him almost in half and the mutants have done the rest. I can use his helmet and pull it from his head. I examine his face. No one I know. So many people I don’t know and now all dead.

I pull the dead HK from the disc and yank the disc upright. Collect his weapon and check it. It seems all right. I climb aboard the disc and fly away from the bomb blast at top speed. My vision is still blurry. Probably only flash damage. I think. I hope so. I hope it isn’t radiation damage. I don’t know if my body can repair radiation damage. I fly out of the city and into the suburbs.

“Thedra, is there a MacJet nearby to get me out?” I ask.

“No, Jaina. The MacJets have been withdrawn to the base,” replies the toneless voice in my head.

“Why?” I demand. “I need one to get me out and we need to search for surviving HKs.”

“The project has been unsuccessful, and an alternative solution is being deployed. All land and air vehicles have been recalled and grounded. At this time the risk of deploying a MacJet to pick you up or search for survivors is not warranted,” replies the voice.

“When I get back to that base, I’m going to reprogram you with an axe!” I yell.

I fly on. I’m furious. I’ve been left in the lurch by a computer. Hospital! I change course. It will have a radiation treatment room.

I try to recall the trauma treatment for radiation poisoning. I know it... something about steroids, iodine, and hyper-activating the immune system. Well, I already have an over-active immune system, so I’ll settle for a shower to remove any dust and ditch the suit. Then all I need to do is find a meal and wait to see whether I have radiation poisoning or not.

I drop the disc outside the hospital and patrol inside, checking for mutants. The place has a lot of mutant damage. Equipment is thrown around and walls are broken. Surprisingly there are bags, belongings, and equipment still scattered here and there. The hospital is damaged, but it hasn’t been looted or ransacked and even better, it still has power. Overhead lights flicker here and there. But I need a shower, and I find it on the second floor.

I follow the signs that say radiation therapy, and the sign on the door in the room marked *Radiation* actually says *Decontamination Shower*.

I reach into the shower and turn the taps on. Please let there be water in the roof tanks. Most large hospitals have water tanks on the roof so there is still water even when the power goes out.

Water gushes from the shower and I climb in, suit and all. I pull the helmet off and then the suit, throwing them both out and standing naked in the freezing cold water.

"Well, no power for the water heater. The end of another perfect day," I mutter as the cold-water cascades over me.

A dial on the wall of the shower reads *Foam*. I turn it on and foam sprays out, mixing with the water. I turn around, holding my face up to the water, with my eyes wide open. The water stings and pains as it pelts down onto my eyes and face. I turn off the foam and turn and turn, letting the water wash the foam and dust away. When I can't stand the cold water anymore, I get out, turning off the taps and looking around. Great, now I'm naked, wet and cold, and there's no towel.

Dripping water, I walk along the corridor leaving wet footprints behind me. A closet. Nothing in there. Another closet. Still nothing. Then a surgery room with towels and green surgical gowns neatly folded in piles. Well, better than nothing. I grab a towel, dry myself and pull on one of the green surgical gowns.

I head back to the discarded suit. I need the field computer, and I remember having it in my hand when I came up in the fountain water. Did I put it back in my pocket? I can't remember, it's such an automatic thing.

In the radiation room, I hunt around until I find a pair of heavy gloves and search the pockets of the suit.

Yes. The field computer is here. It's tricky getting it out of the pocket with the gloves on. I put the computer in the shower and wash it. My eyes are getting better too, not so blurry now.

I pull the computer out of the shower, dry it with the towel and press the on button. Come on you little piece of rubbish, power on. You're supposed to be indestructible. I just hope you're waterproof as well.

A light on the side comes on and the screen flickers and clears.

"Right, time to call some people," I announce to myself. I pull up the comms menu and start scrolling through the list.

Now, who do I call? I can't decide. Should I try General Adam or General Alexa? Our line of command is blurry at best. Until Thedra, my

patrol details had always come from general command via General Adam, but it was the regular army who provided equipment, and we coordinated airstrikes and on-ground management with them.

I shake my head. I've been fighting all day. In fact, I've been fighting non-stop for the last two weeks. I probably have radiation poisoning, and I have various cuts and bruises from the blast. I'm hungry and I should fix myself up first. The call can wait.

I power off the computer and go looking for food. "This place is big. There must be a mess hall here somewhere," I mutter to myself as I walk the corridors.

There are lots of corridors. a laundry, admin centre, x-ray department, kitchen. That rings a bell. I remember reading something on the Net about kitchens and cooking when I was reviewing all the interesting-looking food on the cooking and recipe websites. At the time, all I'd done was look at the pictures and wonder what the food tasted like. I have no idea how to cook something. I'm starting to wish I'd read the sites and instructions and not just looked at the pretty pictures. I didn't need to cook at the compound because the cooks made all our meals, and the ration packs are pre-packed. I have enough trouble boiling water and heating a ration pack while on patrol, and that was literally just fill a bowl and press a button on a tiny heat unit.

I stick my head inside the room marked *Kitchen*. There are big stoves in the middle of the floor. I recognise those from the cooks that sweated over them cooking our food at the compound. Knives and pans and what look to me like cooking equipment that I have no idea how to use, sit on the counters against the walls.

This must be the place. I walk in and the doors swing closed behind me. Further inside are big trolleys with lots of racks on them, stacks of plates and more knives.

I turn a switch on one of the stoves and a flame comes from a round perforated ring on the top. "Well, I can make fire, that's a good start." I say aloud to myself.

I wander around the kitchen, opening drawers and cupboards, looking for the food. In some large walk-in cupboards at the rear of the kitchen, I find cans with pictures on the side of beans, apricots, tomatoes and more.

There are packets of food called spaghetti, flour, sugar and dozens and dozens of different cans and packets and boxes of bottled water. I take one of the bottles of water and drink it as I walk around. I gaze at all the stuff I can't use and have no idea how to use anyway.

In a corner at the rear of the kitchen, is another cupboard door except this one is made of steel. The door is cold to the touch and as I pull it open, cold air and mist flows from the room around my feet. I wander inside the cold room and find row upon row of vegetables in huge boxes and hanging from hooks in the ceiling, are huge slabs of meat.

Here's something I can use. I go back to the other room in search of a long knife and return to the meat, where I cut a huge thick piece from one of the hanging slabs.

Next the vegetable bins, where I start looking for potatoes. I know what potatoes look like so this should be easy. I search up and down the rows of boxes and finally find them in a box marked *Potatoes*. That was a surprise. The most surprising part is that they don't actually look anything like what I'm expecting. They're all brown and covered in bits of dirt. I check the name on the box. Yep, potatoes.

I shrug and take two big monster ones and go back to the kitchen area, making sure to close the door to the giant fridge. If nothing else the contents of the room will keep me going for a while. Always assuming I can figure out how to cook something. I can eat raw meat, but I don't particularly care for it.

I go back to my pretty flame on the stove and throw the meat on the flame and the flame goes out. Hmmm, well that's not going to work.

I hunt around for something to put the meat on and find a pile of blackened steel plates with handles. I put one of the steel plates over the

ring and relight the flame. I put the meat on the steel plate and soon there is the sound of something sizzling. Just like in the mess hall.

Yes, I can cook! Now for the potatoes. I don't fancy dirt, so I wash them under a tap and put them on the plate beside the meat. Apart from burning on the bottom, nothing is happening to them.

I turn the meat over and burn my fingers. Stupid, use the knife to turn it next time. I roll the potatoes around on the plate, hoping they will get hot through and cook. I don't think it's working out too well. I cut them in half and let them just lie on the hot steel.

I don't know how long to cook this stuff for, so I keep poking the meat and potatoes with my knife and cutting bits off as it cooks. I'm starving.

The meat is cooked enough, well, it's hot through and it starts to warm me up. I pick up one of the potatoes and bite into it. They're hard and raw in the middle, but I eat them anyway. While I eat my sort of hot meal, I look around the room at the rest of the stuff.

There's a lot of things that I don't even have names for. One thing I find interesting is called a mincer. I know the machine is a mincer, because it has a big sign on the wall above it saying *Mincer*. It's huge and shiny and it looks serious sitting against the wall. I wander over to it for a closer look. There's a big hole in the top and buttons on the side. I press the green start button, and a noisy motor starts up and blades start spinning in the bottom.

There's also another sign that says *Keep Hands Out*. It's the *Keep Hands Out* sign that I think is funny, because looking at those whirling blades, I decide you'd have to be pretty dumb to put your hands in there.

I press the red stop button, grab another couple of bottles of water and head back to the radiation room. At least I have hot food in me and I'm feeling a lot better and warmer because of it.

Back in the radiation department, I hunt around for a portable Radiation Monitoring Unit. "There must be one here somewhere," I

mutter, as I open cupboards and drawers, and finally find one in a locked cabinet that I break open with my knife.

One general-purpose portable RMU. I turn it on, and it starts ticking at the background radiation. I point it at myself. It ticks a little faster, but not much. That's a good sign, but it doesn't mean I haven't suffered radiation poisoning.

I point the RMU at the combat suit and there's lots of mad ticking. Right, I'm not wearing that again. Next the weapon. There's lots of ticking, but not quite so mad. I pull the heavy gloves on and throw the weapon in the shower and while it has a shower, I head outside and discover that the sun has set.

I find the flying disc where I discarded it and point the RMU at it. There's mad ticking with the metre at about half. I don't know if that's good or bad. I only have a basic knowledge of RMUs.

The information is there but basic but it's really only at a go or no-go level. I know about nuclear weapons, but the military knowledge is all about what they can do and how to arm and deploy them. My knowledge of what to do if one goes off nearby is limited to *run away, very, very fast*. Treatment and levels, exposures, and stuff, that's what the medical staff are for.

I wander back inside, retrieve the field computer and check the signal from the satellite. No signal.

I drag the weapon out of the shower and check it with the RMU. It's ticking about the same as the computer now. I pick up the weapon and the computer, head for the stairs and make my way to the roof.

I collect a couple of blankets along the way and break open the locked fire escape doors to gain access to the roof. The roof of the building is flat except for the various equipment covers and the water tower. I check the computer again. Signal! I pull up the comms menu and select email. With two fingers, I start to type.

From: Jaina1798

To: General Alexa Peternon

Subject: Hunter/Killer patrol of continental Australia

Classification: Eyes Only

We encountered a mutant force in excess of 750,000 today. The patrol contained them in an open park in the centre of the first primary city target. Thedra overrode a target airstrike of conventional weapons and deployed a TND in their place. I am unable to raise any team member on general channel and can only assume that all members are dead. I will search for survivors in the morning. I'm compromised and probably have radiation poisoning. I have taken what countermeasures I am capable of at an abandoned hospital outside the city. Thedra will not send a pickup. I require urgent assistance. Please advise. I am on field unit DXT8769483

I hit Send. It isn't the best report I've ever made but I've had a fairly ordinary day, and General Peternon will have already received a status report anyway. If he gets the message, he will be able to call me or have someone call me and get me out of here. I have no one else to call.

I sit on the roof and gaze up at the stars. There's lots and lots of stars all glittering peacefully in the night sky. It's a cool night and the wind from the ocean makes it cooler. I wrap the blanket around me to keep warm.

The city is silent and here and there, lights from buildings are visible. With the city powered by solar, fusion and underground power cables, it will probably be a long time before the last light goes out.

I briefly consider my options if I get no response from General Peternon.

Search for HK survivors. Contact local forces, there must be some general military units still operational. Maybe I can contact one of the ships patrolling the coast. I have a few options. Except for number one,

the thought of contacting regular forces isn't very appealing. They're not exactly known for being very helpful.

The thought of no other HKs doesn't really bother me. They were never friends like in the shows on the NET. They were team members, nothing more, and there were always replacements, as few as there are. We fight to die. What else is there. There will more HKs. The people who built me will build more and I'll patrol with them until I die. All I need to do is contact my command and wait for orders.

The silence is intense. The only sound is the distant faint sound of the ocean. No animals, no mutants. I'm alone in a city far from my patrol grounds. No command. No orders. No support personnel. This is not normal, not normal for me. They may not be friends, but I have never not had team members nearby. Orders to follow. Patrols to complete. My life, my day-to-day existence. Who I am and what I do, is clearly defined. Ordered, organised, predictable. Now I have no team, no orders.

I fall asleep with the field computer glowing peacefully beside me.

A beeping sound wakes me. The computer is flashing red which means an urgent message. I touch the flashing email icon on the screen.

> From: General Alexa Peternon
>
> To: Jaina1798
>
> Subject: Hunter/Killer patrol of continental Australia
>
> Classification: Eyes Only
>
> Your situation is grave and no assistance is coming. The Joint Chiefs and World Armed Forces group have been stood down. The world leaders will commence Operation Dustcloud in nine days. The satellite networks are being shut down until after the event. I expect to be arrested in a matter of hours for leading a group intent on preventing the upcoming Dustcloud operation.

> I believe the operation will be more devastating than the mutants. I have changed your access to unrestricted and done what I can to hide you in the system. I suggest you take full advantage of your access while you can. In particular check Operation Dustcloud, Thedra, and Project Hastati.
>
> Good Luck and RUN!!

I sit and read it again. Then I start searching and downloading. I will download everything I can and read it all later. I also need to move from here. I leave the computer downloading on the rooftop and head back downstairs. Breakfast. More of the same as yesterday, except I slice the potatoes thinner, which seems to work much better. Apart from the black bits.

I need clothes and something better than the flying disc. The disc still makes the RMU tick like mad and I don't trust it. On my way back to the roof to collect the computer, I consider potential threats.

I frown at the thought of potential threats. Why wipe out the HKs? Why would Thedra deploy a TND and wipe out the people it was supposed to protect?

General Peternon said he was being arrested, that he hid me and to run. If I'm the last HK, then I can safely assume an arrest or termination order is currently in effect. Termination would be the easiest and safest, quick and tidy. I don't have to obey humans, but I can't kill them. Would whoever is now in charge, take the risk of trying to capture me. Easier to terminate.

The most likely scenario would be another missile strike targeting the field computer. I wonder how long I have. They could send a patrol to take me. I won't be able to fight them, but the risk to the patrol from the mutants would be significant. Yes, I decide. A missile strike would be the most probable attack if one were coming.

I check the field computer. The download is complete, and I switch it off to save power and prevent tracking or at least make tracking harder. Thedra knows exactly where I am thanks to my head chip, but the

computer is either offline or ignoring me. In any case, it's time to move to another location. I head downstairs and out of the hospital, into a large open area full of cars I'd seen earlier.

I try the doors of various cars, but they're all securely locked. I break a window with the butt of my weapon and climb into the driver's seat. The car won't move. It does nothing when I press buttons and foot controls. From what I can figure out, it needs some sort of unlocking device. I head back to the admin area of the hospital. They would surely have shared the vehicles and there must be something to open them and make them move.

Why lock the cars? It's a puzzle. All the vehicles in the compound just went. We got in, pressed the accelerator and the vehicle moved. I don't understand why these would be any different.

I search the offices and find a locked cabinet marked *Cars* with keys inside. I take half a dozen of the keys and finally find one that not only opens the car, but when I put the key in a matching hole in the dash of the car, makes the car move.

Right, I have my weapon, the RMU and the field computer. I need clothes and a better vehicle. A military vehicle would be good. I also need to look at the field computer and clarify what General Peternon is so concerned about and why he's being arrested. But first, clothes. The hospital gown is doing nothing for me.

I drive north looking for a disposal depot, equipment, even a shopping centre. An un-looted one would be nice. I follow the deserted main road toward the mountain range to the west.

I've patrolled enough towns and cities to know what to look for and I find it on the other side of the road. I drive over the centre divider in the road, which makes the little car complain, and straight through the closed doors of the shopping centre which makes the little car complain some more. The sound of the breaking glass echoes in the empty building and makes my head hurt.

I have a headache. A dull throbbing behind my eyes and I feel slightly nauseous.

I wander through the shopping centre which is un-looted and perfect. The city is another puzzle. From what I've seen, it appears mostly un-looted and largely intact. The towns and cities we patrolled were always looted and the looters seem to cause most of the damage to the buildings. This city has derelict cars which is common, but apart from mutant damage like broken windows, walls and doors where the mutants were trapped inside, I can see almost no damage from looters.

Finding a drug store, I use the butt of my weapon to break the lock on the sliding door. I search the aisles looking for a picture. We don't need to take drugs or tablets, that's what the doctors are for and its very rare. They were always very reluctant and sparing in what they gave us.

I need something for my headache. It's getting worse and tinging my vision red. Even the light hurts. I remember seeing an advert on a website for Tyler, Tylan, something for headaches.

I finally find what I want, a packet with a picture of a woman with pain etched on her face, lightning in her head and the words *Headache*. I don't bother to read the rest, that's me, lightning in the head and squinty eyes. I open the pack and swallow four of the white tablets. Probably too many, but with the week I'm having I don't think they'll kill me.

Now for some clothes. I walk the long wide corridor with shops on both sides. There's a toyshop and another toyshop right beside it. Then a bookshop and a window of hats and another window full of shoes.

I break the door to the shoe shop and go through everything. Trying on sandals, pumps, slippers and high heels. I've seen these in the movies and the websites I visit. They look pretty.

I look at the high heels on my feet, turning my feet from side to side to admire them. I stand up, wow, so tall. Weird. I take a step, wobble, and nearly break my ankle when I fall over. I throw them away and find a pair of runners instead. I can worry about pretty shoes another day. The

runners will do until I find some boots, and this shop appears to be completely devoid of anything remotely resembling my idea of a boot.

More shops, more shops. Clothes, please. Dress shop. I break open the door. I have fun trying on the dresses and blouses. I've only ever worn the black combat suit. I take a nice black dress which is very short, and the neckline comes way down between my breasts. I feel almost naked, but it will be fun until I find something more suitable, and besides, I'm over the hospital gown.

I walk along the rows of shops, looking for clothes that will suit my needs. I need warm, strong, protective clothes.

I stop to look at my reflection in a window. I look ridiculous, in trainers and a little dress that barely covers me. My hair is all tangled and my skin is flaky.

What was that last bit? I look at my arms. They are flaky, that can't be good. I run my hands up my arms. My skin is flaking and dry. Yep, not good and my headache which had eased a little after the tablets, is back with a vengeance, making me squint and wince with the pain.

I step back from the window, still looking at myself, "Stop fooling around, Jaina," I say aloud.

There's a bench behind me and I sit down. I've been uprooted and the compound is gone along with everyone and everything I know. All the support crew, the armourer, I don't even know his name. Doctor Jane, Colonel Adam, the medical staff, the cooks, everyone. Even the voice has deserted me. I haven't heard from Thedra since yesterday afternoon when I yelled at her, but then she killed everyone so that's no great loss.

To top it all off, I've just spent three weeks flying up and down an alien dead landscape in the middle of nowhere. My team is dead. The entire Hunter/Killer group is dead. All two thousands of them are dead and now I have flaky skin and my hair is all tangled and messed up, and I'm thirsty and I've left the water in the hospital.

I sit on the bench and cry. I don't know what to do. I'm a soldier and I follow orders. I kill mutants. That's what I do and it's all I do. I'm fooling myself thinking I know what to do just because I've seen it on the Net. I don't know how to cook or whether I should take a painkiller or even where to get clothes from. Someone else does that. Someone else tells me what to do. The only decisions I make are which target is next.

I lie down on the bench and curl up in a ball. I don't want to play anymore. I just want to do what I've always done, the only thing I've done, the only thing I know.

I suddenly realise I've put my weapon down somewhere. I don't even remember doing that and the headache won't go away, and my hair is a mess. I close my eyes and cry.

I don't know how long I lie curled up in a ball, until an annoying voice in my head wakes me up. "Jaina, Jaina, Jaina, Jaina, Jaina...." It won't stop.

I put my hands over my ears and yell at it to shut up. "Shut up, shut up, shut up!" I yell.

"Jaina, get up!" orders the voice.

"No! You can't make me!" I yell. I lie on the bench. I'm not getting up.

"Jaina, if you don't get up, you're going to die," says the voice.

"I don't care, and I can't anyway, and I don't know what to do and I've got a headache, and my hair is a mess. Leave me alone!" I yell back. I'm losing it and I know it and I can't help it.

"Jaina, get up and I'll tell you what to do. Would you like that?" the voice asks. The voice is calm, quiet, and persistent. It's also different, not toneless like Thedra.

I sigh and sit up. "Okay. I'm up. What do I do now?"

"Tell me how you are?" asks the voice.

"Everyone is dead. I'm tired. My hair's a mess. I have a headache. I'm hungry. I need clothes and I'm thirsty," I pout.

There is a long silence, and I lie back down again and wrap my arms around myself. I feal quite unwell. Along with the headache, I feel nauseous and dizzy. My throat burns from gagging on whatever is in my stomach that keeps trying to come up.

"Tell me where you are now," asks the voice, startling me as I begin to fall asleep.

"I'm in a shopping centre. I'm all alone and I've lost my weapon. Everyone is dead."

"I know. It's okay, Jaina." The voice is very calm and soothing. "Let's get you something to eat first. Is the power still on?"

"Yes." Voice is a bit sulky but at least I'm listening. Part of me, some part at the back of my mind, knows I'm in trouble, knows I'm in danger of losing control. I have to listen, have to obey. If the voice will only order me then I'll be okay. I can obey the voice and then everything will be okay.

"Get up and look for a butcher or meat shop. Tell me what shops you go past while you're looking. You can do that. Get up, Jaina," says the voice.

It's close enough to an order. I stand and start walking, calling out the names of the shops as I pass them.

"Stop!" orders the voice. "That one, there's water in there. Get some water bottles."

I break the door lock with a handy fire extinguisher. I don't know what I've done with my weapon. I take a bottle of water and drink the lot. I take another for later.

"How are you doing, Jaina?" asks the voice.

"I'm not thirsty anymore. I still have a headache, and I don't feel well. I found some headache tablets earlier. Should I take some?" I ask.

"Tell me what they're called."

I read out the name on the packet.

"You can take two of them," says the voice.

I swallow two of the tablets with the water.

"Keep looking for the meat place, Jaina," orders the voice.

I keep walking and the voice murmurs to me. Quiet words. Nothing special, just soft quiet words that are almost impossible to hear. I call out the names of the shops as I pass them.

"Stop! That one, Jaina. Food," says the voice.

Again, I break down the door with the handy fire extinguisher and am surprised I'm still carrying it. Inside the shop is meat in long glass counters and behind the counter a cold room. I go to the cold room where there's meat hanging from hooks again.

I cut pieces of the meat with a knife I find behind the counter. There's nowhere to cook it and I crouch on the floor, eating the raw meat. It isn't very nice. It tastes slightly off, and it doesn't help the nausea one bit, but I'm so hungry. I feel like I haven't eaten for days.

"How are you doing now, Jaina?" asks the quiet voice.

"Good, better, I've eaten."

"Now for some clothes. Can you see a big shop, bigger than all the rest?" He speaks to me as if he thinks I'm a child.

That's strange. Thedra voice is toneless, neither man nor woman. This voice sounds like a man. This is not Thedra talking in my head. This is someone else. Maybe an aide to General Peternon or maybe even General Peternon himself. No-one else would know I'm alive. Since the TND, I've only been in contact with Thedra and General Peternon. For now, I'll listen and obey. The headache is still there but at least my stomach doesn't feel like it wants to eject its contents by any means necessary.

"No, I can't see a bigger shop," I reply.

"Just keep walking and keep telling me what you pass," orders the voice.

I walk past more shops while the voice murmurs in my head. I just listen and obey, it's easier than thinking and thinking is hard with the headache.

"Stop! That one, the camping store. It has clothes for you," says the voice.

I've forgotten the fire extinguisher this time, but there's a leafy plant in a large ceramic pot nearby and I heave it through the window. The glass shatters and I step inside.

"Are there any clothes there that will fit you?" asks the voice.

"Yes, combat fatigues," I reply.

"Find some and get dressed," orders the voice.

I take the black dress off. It looks pretty, but I don't really like it. I throw it in a corner and search the shop naked.

I hunt through the shop and the shelves and find pants, shirt, a jacket and a webbed equipment belt and a pair of heavy woollen socks and combat style boots. It's all fake, rip-off rubbish but I feel better dressed in something sort of functional.

There are water bottles, the sort I can carry on my belt. I collect two of them and check through the rest of the stuff. Most of it is junk, tents with plastic poles and little shovels that bend when I use one to pry open the counter with the knives.

I search through the knives. Junk, junk, junk. Decent knife. I strap it to my leg, easy to reach and out of the way. Compass, junk, digital junk, more junk. Prism compass that goes in my pocket, and a decent torch with a compact aluminium body and a fusion cell and a couple of igniters for starting a fire.

"How are you doing, Jaina?" asks the voice.

"Better. I'm dressed. I have a knife, water bottles, compass, torch and boots," I reply. I walk out of the shop, heading back the way I came.

"Where are you going now, Jaina?" asks the voice.

"To find my weapon. I put it down somewhere," I reply.

I walk back the way I came and the voice murmurs quietly to me. I find my weapon in the dress shop. I pick it up and check the ammunition load. Half-gone. I need more. The disc will have some, except the disc ticks. I can use the gloves to get the ammunition blocks, wash them, and see what the RMU says about them then.

I head for the car. It's almost night outside. Should I stay or go back to the hospital?

I ask the voice. "It's almost dark, should I stay here or go back to the hospital?"

"Go back to the hospital. I need you to do a few things," the voice replies.

"Okay," I reply. Instructions, orders. I feel better, calm and organised. The hospital has better food. I don't like the taste of the meat at the shopping centre.

I drive the little car back to the hospital. It isn't steering very well, and I don't think introducing it to the doors was in its best interest.

The hospital is still there, and I walk inside. Nothing has changed.

"Jaina, do you need a meal?" asks the voice.

"No, I'm fine thanks," I reply.

"Good. Now, I want you to find a Medilab. It's a machine with a display on it and it's mounted on wheels. It says Medilab on it. Go to the emergency room. You'll find one there," says the voice.

I walk through the hospital until I find a sign pointing to the emergency ward. My headache is getting worse, and I tell the voice. "My headache is worse and I'm nauseous again."

"Find the Medilab and then you can take another two tablets. You still have the tablets?" asks the voice.

"Yes, in my pocket," I reply.

In the emergency ward, I find there are Medilab things beside each bed. “I’ve found them. Now what?” I ask.

“Turn one on,” whispers the voice in my head. I switch one of the units on. After a short wait, the display lights up and says, *Ready*.

“Now what?” I ask.

“On the bottom right side of the machine is a lead ...” whispers the voice and stops.

“What?” I ask. “Hello! Bottom side of the machine?” I ask.

There’s no reply. I don’t know what to do with the Medilab and I don’t like the way the voice was just cut off like that either. Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to help me and now they’ve disappeared too.

I contemplate turning on the field computer, but if I do, they’ll know where I am. I don’t know who they are or even if they care or not. I also don’t know if they can track the chip in my head. It has much better signal coverage than the computer and it worked inside the hospital when the computer hadn’t. I know Thedra can track the head chip but just because someone other than Thedra can use the chip comms, doesn’t mean they can track it. Yes, the computer can stay off.

I go down to the kitchen and look around again. There’s stainless steel everywhere. It’s a great big stainless-steel box. I wonder if it will kill the signal for the head chip. I decide not to worry about it. If I’m about to be taken out by a missile, I won’t know about it anyway.

I’m not hungry, but I make a meal. I’ve taken a lot of damage in the last two days and if my body is going to repair the radiation poisoning, it will need a lot more food to do it.

I return upstairs and retrieve the ammunition blocks from the disc, throw them in the shower and turn the tap on them. I let them soak for a couple of minutes and then decide to just leave them there. It’s not like they’re going to rust or anything.

I head for the fourth floor to find an empty bed. I’m going to get a decent sleep and worry about everything tomorrow. If a missile is

incoming, I won't know about it until it's too late anyway and I doubt there's anyone prowling around that I should worry about. Just in case, I jam the door on the room closed anyway.

I'M NOT DEAD YET.

The morning sun shining through the window wakes me up. I'm not in a good way. My hair is falling out in great clumps, and my skin is peeling and blistering. My faeces are black, stinking things and full of streaks of blood. To top it all off, the headache, dizziness and nausea are all back with a vengeance.

The contents of my stomach finally decide to they want out and I throw up in the bathroom. There is a lot of blood and bile. It isn't very pleasant, and it stinks. I'm in serious trouble. I definitely have a good dose of radiation poisoning, and there's no doubt I'm dying.

I find a mirror and examine myself in it. I'm a mess. My eyes are black and blood shot, my skin is wrinkled and flaking, and there are blisters on my lips. I put a finger in my mouth and feel my teeth. At least they aren't loose, yet. I think my hair looks even worse today than yesterday, but the good thing is that at the rate it's falling out, soon I won't have to worry about it.

I walk down to the kitchen and make myself a breakfast of meat and half-raw potatoes. When I'm halfway through eating it, I throw it all up. I lean on the counter, panting from the effort and pain.

I am not in a good way. I need help. If only the medical team were here. They could throw me in a tub of goo and hope for the best. What I need is goo and lots of it. Protein. I need lots of it to heal. What if the meals I'm half eating aren't enough? When I lost my arm, my team packed it with ration packs so it would start to heal by itself. Goo. It's the raw material I need for my body to repair itself.

The nanobots help accelerate things by fixing the major damage. Are they still working or were they fried by the radiation too? I look up at the wall. Goo. I need goo, not a mincer. Mincer. Would those blades chop up meat? The sign says keep hands out so it probably will.

I go looking for a portable oxygen tank. The emergency ward has dozens of them, and I carry two down to the kitchen along with an oxygen tube and a role of surgical tape. I'm going to make my own goo and I'm not going to die. Well, I probably am, but I'm going to fight it.

There is a huge steel tub against the wall by the mincer. If I curl up, I can fit in that. It will have to do. I push the tub under the mincer and get a piece of the hanging meat off a hook. Either its heavy or I'm getting weak, probably the later I decide.

I struggle to get it up into the top of the mincer and breathe a sigh of relief as it topples into the hopper. I hit the start button. The machine roars and the meat starts bouncing up and down and then the cutters bite in. Red crushed meat and blood pour out of the bottom of the mincer into the tub. I get another slab of the meat, and another and another, and let the mincer do its work until the tub is a bit over three-quarters full.

I strip off my clothes and pile them in a corner, turn the oxygen tank on and listen for the faint hiss of air escaping from the end of the tube before I tape the tube to my nose. I cover my mouth with more of the tape, sealing it closed. I step into the tub and slowly lower myself into the minced meat.

Yuk. It's cold, it stinks, and it feels disgusting. I tape my eyes closed and lie down. The meat covers me, and it feels disgusting, but at least I can't smell it. I lie in the dark and wait and sleep.

I have no idea how long I've been in the tub. My legs have cramped, and I can barely move. I struggle to sit upright. My back is a burning red fire of stabbing pain from being curled up for so long and my legs won't move. I struggle upright, wipe the slime from my face, and pull the tape from my eyes and mouth and the hose from my nose.

The smell hits me like a train. Rancid, decaying and putrid. The meat is mostly gone and in its place is a slimy grey fetid mush. I try to stand and topple over on to my side, taking the tub with me. The stinking grey slime is everywhere. I crawl out of the tub, dragging myself along by my hands and trying to get away from the worst of the stinking slime.

My legs are cramped up and my back is on fire. The stench from the slime is overwhelming.

Now that I'm out of the tub, I can stretch my legs out and straighten my back. Nope, I'll do the back later, that hurts. I start massaging the muscles in my legs, trying to get them working again and eventually I get them straight. Now and then I get a cramp in a muscle. I grit my teeth, clamp my hand on the pulsing, cramping muscle and wait for the spasm to stop.

I can finally stand, but I'm bent over like an old cripple. My back is on fire, and it feels like someone has a knife in it. I hobble to the door and go looking for my shower. Shower on, and oh for a hot shower.

Half bent over I stand in the freezing water while it washes the slime from me. I hobble out, still bent over. I can't straighten my back, and I think the muscles have cramped up. I hobble back to the kitchen, massaging my back as I go and trying to straighten up now and then. Flexing, moving around, and each time I can stand a little better.

The stink in the kitchen is appalling. There is no way I'm having a meal in there again.

I grab my clothes, get out and painfully dress in the corridor. I hobble back upstairs to the foyer. My back is not getting any better.

In the foyer is a steel bar running the length of the roof. The room curtains hang from it. I move a chair so that it's under the bar and carefully climb on to the chair. I reach up and just manage to grab the bar with a bit of pain in my back, careful.

I kick the chair away and scream with the pain and the sound of a crack from my back, as I finally straighten out. I just hang there for a bit, waiting for the pain to lessen. I let go and massage my back, rolling my shoulders and stretching. Better, much, much better.

Right, time to find a mirror and check the damage. I examine my face in the mirror. All my hair is gone, even my eyebrows. It looks weird but at least my hair is no longer a mess, and one less thing to worry about.

Instead of red bloodshot demon eyes, my eyes are black again and the sparkly lights in the pupils are back. I'm still not sure I like my eyes. The black around my eyes has gone and my skin isn't flaky and the blisters on my lips are gone. I feel good, well better. The headache and nausea are gone.

I have no idea what day it is or how long I lay in the tub, but it looks like the home-made goo worked. I need a meal again. I've been burning energy and calories at a massive rate, and I hope that my appetite will settle down now. I smile at the face in the mirror. I feel good again and it's time to get back to work.

I should search for survivors and something to eat, but first I need to know how long I've been out of action for. I find the little field computer and switch it on. The date is March 27, 2077, the city attack was on the 20th. The 21st was have-a-nervous-breakdown day. The 22nd was in-the-tub day. General Alexa said something about nine days before Operation Dustcloud commences. That was on the 20th, so two days until Operation Dustcloud. It's been seven days since the city attack and the TND. Any survivors are dead or will have sorted themselves out by now. I won't look for survivors.

I need to get a few things organised and I start making a mental list. I need supplies. I need better clothes than these because they chafe in unexpected places. I need transport and the cars outside won't get me very far. I need my weapon, ammunition, and communications. I need food and I need to read the field computer and find out what General Peternon is so worried about, and I need to get to Nevada.

I collect my weapon and check the ammunition blocks in the shower with the RMU. The RMU doesn't go nuts, so I put the ammunition blocks in my pockets along with the computer. Water. I'm not going downstairs because the kitchen is foul. I fill the water bottles I acquired from a tap near the car and then start trying keys in the cars.

I finally find a car that opens, and I throw my gear inside. I sit and think about my list. There's something weird on it. I take a mouthful of

water as I puzzle over my list and spray the water out, all over the interior of the car and myself.

I know that smell and taste, even diluted as much as it is. I can barely taste it myself and no one else would ever know it was there, the stink and taste of mutants.

The water tanks on the roof of the hospital are clean, but the water supply of the city is poisoned. I throw the bottles away and with the field computer, pull up the map overlay of the city and expand it, zooming out more and more. There, dams in the mountains to the west.

The city water supply must come from the dams, and the dams must be poisoned. Dead mutants in the water would do it. But how? I've never seen mutants in water. I've only ever seen them drink and they'll travel for miles and miles to avoid crossing even a creek, let alone a dam. How did mutants end up in the dams?

If the water supply was poisoned and the entire population infected at almost the same time, it explains the lack of looting in the city. I wonder how large a population and what area the dams supply. It would be unlikely they are only for a single city. They probably service the entire coastal region, including any towns in the mountains. I shiver at the thought of an entire city turning into mutants.

I use the computer to start a search for reports on the mutant activity on the continent. I have the original information that General Peternon told me to get and now I start it downloading anything and everything that's even remotely classified. It's a serious breach in security, but I figure I might need the information in the future and better to get it now before anyone figures out, I still have access.

I leave the hospital and head for the airport. I need transport and a plane, or a helicopter will be far more useful than a car. I follow the signs on the roads and the field computer map to the airport. Along the way, I pass a supermarket and stop to break down the front door.

Inside are boxes of water and the shelves are stacked with cans of food. I search the cans looking for pictures of meat or meat with anything. I

find some cans with meat and vegetables on them, which I open and eat in the aisle, straight from the can. Even compared to my usual boring compound meals and ration packs, the canned food tastes foul but my stomach is full, and I feel better for it.

I collect two boxes of water and throw them in the car. For a while, I'm not drinking anything that isn't in a sealed bottle. I open and drink one of the bottles as I drive to get rid of the taste of the poisoned water and the canned meat. The water tastes a bit funny, somewhat bitter, but quite nice. At least it doesn't taste of mutant.

When I arrive at the airport, I follow the signs to the private airport section. A set of high security gates and a high double-chain fence separate me from the aircraft. There is no way the little car is going to crash through those gates, and the car agrees with me.

There's a guardhouse on the left-hand side of the gates and on my side of the fence. People must have driven up, shown their ID, and the guard would operate the gate and let them through. Well, easy then. I'm getting good at breaking and looting. I'll just break into the guardhouse and open the gates.

I hit the glass window of the guardhouse with the butt of my weapon. The weapon bounces straight back and the glass just stays there looking smug. "Fine, be like that," I mutter. I bring the weapon round and fire a round at the window.

I examine the neat hole through the little car, who looks a bit miffed that I'd shoot it. The glass, meanwhile, looks even smugger than it did before. I step back. Hmm that is seriously bulletproof stuff.

I look at the fence. I can easily climb it, but I don't really like razor wire.

I walk along the fence a short distance. Well, sorry fence, but the glass is being stubborn. I shoot down six of the fence support poles at their bases before the fence bites the bullet. I giggle to myself. "Fence, you're tougher than a mute."

I walk over the downed fence to the guardhouse and locate the switch to open the gates. As the gates swing open, I tap the glass and announce, "How do you feel now, eh? The fence took it for you."

As I drive through the open gates, I am sure the glass is giving me the finger, and I studiously ignore its attempts to provoke me. Instead, I drive around the area with the windows down. I feel hot and sweaty and the heat waves on the road are making me swerve all over the place.

There are lots of happy little planes and a couple of sad ones with no engines. I find a big, chubby green helicopter. I half fall out of the car, swaying a little and introduce myself to the helicopter.

"Hello, chubby green helicopter." I giggle. I collect my boxes of bottled water and the computer from the car, dump them in the helicopter, climb in the open cargo door, and fall out.

Weird, the helicopter doesn't like me. I climb in again and this time I make it. I sway about and as I step into the cockpit my head hits the support beam. The deck of the cargo hold rises up very fast to say hello.

My headache is back. I sit in the door of the helicopter, nursing my headache and avoiding the puddle of vomit on the floor of the hangar where I've been sick. I wonder if the radiation poisoning is back, except my skin is fine. I just don't feel well.

I pick up a bottle of water and open it. I wrinkle my nose at the smell of the water. I can't stand it. I just want plain water, not this. The label says *Vodka*. Well, I'm not getting that brand again.

I get up and head for the offices in the hangar. Surely one of the offices will have water in it.

I search the rooms and finally locate a storeroom with boxes of water and instant meals. I open a bottle and sniff it. No smell. I taste it. No taste, good. I drink the lot, grab two boxes of water and stack two boxes of instant meals on top. The whole lot goes into the helicopter and the other two boxes come out. I am not going near those again.

I walk around the helicopter, checking it before I climb in. This time I don't hit my head on the support beam as I sit down in the cockpit. I put the field computer on the top of my leg and use a couple of straps to secure it. It's still downloading data, and the memory indicator is at seventy-six per cent. I should shut it down to prevent anyone from tracking it but figure if anyone was, I would have already been introduced to a missile or two.

I start the pre-flight check and run through the sequence automatically. Check the flight controls, check lights, check circuit breakers and rotor brake. Press the power cell ignition and watch the power management, radar and nav systems power up. Open the toggle covers and press the rotor start switches. The big electric motors above me power up with a deep whine and the rotors slowly start to spin. Check rev counters for tail and main rotors, all green. Increase power and taxi out of the hangar.

I sit the helicopter on the pad, and while everything settles down and finishes coming online, I pull up the military base information for this area on the field computer.

There is a big, combined operations military base with an identity code CMIL87, about 700 kilometres south. I punch the co-ordinates into the nav computer and wait until it's sorted itself out and worked out a course. A flight map overlay with green arrows indicating distance and ETA appear on the nav computer screen. I pull up on the power control and lift off, heading south.

I set the helicopter radio to scanner mode and tune the transmitter to the HK general broadcast frequency. Every few minutes, I hit the transmit key. "This is Jaina1798, any HK." I get nothing back and nothing on the radio scanner.

I'm feeling better and I run through my mental checklist.

Transport, check. Weapon and ammunition, check. Supplies, check. Communications, check. Nevada, no check. I blink in surprise. I suddenly realise what's wrong with my mental checklist.

Nevada, USA. I don't need that. Do I? Why do I need to go to Nevada? I have one day to get there before Operation Dustcloud, which I still haven't found out anything about and all I have is a private commercial helicopter to get me there. I don't think so. And besides, what's so special about Nevada anyway?

Well, with any luck the military base I'm heading for will have personnel who will be able to get me to Nevada. Assuming they don't try to shoot me down first. I check the field computer. It's finished downloading and I switch it off.

I look out the window at the ground rushing past and see mutants running in packs. These are the first I've seen since the TND incident.

There are abandoned cars and areas where fires have started and then died. I can't see any people and there's nothing on the radio. A helicopter flying in controlled airspace would surely be getting yelled at by now. Assuming anyone is there to control the airspace. The helicopter flies south while I listen to the silent comm systems.

SYDNEY.

The radio chirps about an hour into my flight, “This is Sydney base, identify Jaina1798.” I jump. It’s been so quiet the sound of the radio startles me.

“Sydney base, this is Jaina1798 in...” I read the call sign on the label above the radio. “DTH9716. I am south bound heading 192 for CMIL87.”

There’s a long pause before the radio comes back on again. “Jaina1798, change heading to 125, divert to Sydney base. CMIL87 is inhospitable. Confirm.”

I check the map on the flight computer. There’s a commercial airport in the general direction they want me to go, but I want a military aircraft to get to Nevada. Just because CMIL87 is compromised, doesn’t mean I won’t be able to get a fast plane there.

“Jaina1798, confirm course change. I am transmitting direction and landing beacons,” announces the voice on the radio.

In two minds, I change course. If CMIL87 is out, then these people probably come from there and they’ll have fast transports. Even though I always get the impression the regular forces hate it and us, they have standing orders to assist HK teams.

I follow the beacons that Sydney base transmits. The little direction indicators on the nav screen tell me to go up, down, left, right. I fly on and the distance meter counts down. At five kilometres out, I slow and start looking for my destination.

I should be able to see landing lights and runways. All I can see are houses, shopping centres, high-rise buildings, and a big, cleared area coming up. A check of the nav computer confirms it as my destination.

“Jaina1798, we have you on visual. Land on manual,” crackles the voice on the radio.

I fly over the top and circle around the structure below me. The structure is a huge, cleared centre with a massive ten-meter-thick concrete wall running around it. The top of the concrete wall has rows of

razor wire on both the outside and inside, with a gap between the rows of wire large enough for two or three men to walk side by side with ease.

On one side of the wall are huge double doors on both the inside and outside of the wall. Another high fence protects the road that leads from the outer door to the main road. Surrounding the outer wall is a hundred metres of cleared land protected by another high razor fence.

There are manned towers on each corner of the concrete wall and more towers in the centre of the wall, with spotlights mounted everywhere. There are also what looks like accommodation blocks, arranged in rows around a cleared and fenced area in the middle of the compound. The cleared area in the middle is easily large enough to land the helicopter and even has a helpful helipad H outlined in the middle. Across the top of the accommodation buildings, just in case I'm in any doubt, are the words "State Prison".

I slow my forward speed to a crawl and slowly circle the compound. I have a problem. Do I land or not? There are men, women and children wandering around the compound. I can see cars, trucks, and even a light armoured vehicle. I don't know if they put women and children in prison or not. I really should have spent more time reading about current events on the Net.

"Jaina1798, land on the H," orders the radio.

"Roger that, just verifying site clearance for an unfamiliar set down," I reply.

I glance at the field computer strapped to my leg. The computer is a serious problem. It contains far too much data it shouldn't have, most of which I haven't even had a look at yet. More importantly, I don't want to lose the computer.

I set the helicopter in hover mode and turn on the autopilot. I unstrap the computer from my leg and look for somewhere to hide it. The seats! They're big, over-cushioned things made for commercial pilots who like their comfort.

I grab the knife on my leg and lean forward, feeling under the seat. There! I slice the lining and push the computer inside and as far back as I can. It will have to do and with luck no one will look too hard. I disable the autopilot and slide the helicopter toward the ground, preparing to land.

"Jaina1798, on final, stand clear," I announce on the radio.

I touch down on the H and let the big rotors spin down, deliberately going through the power down sequence slowly, while I watch the men gather in front of the helicopter.

I leave the flight helmet on and just push the visor up, step into the back and collect my weapon. Sliding open the side cargo door, I jump out and walk toward the waiting men with my weapon pointing at the ground. I don't know what I can do if they turn out to be hostile, but having my weapon with me makes me feel a lot more comfortable.

The four waiting men wear military style fatigues and carry light arm automatic weapons. They aren't regular army or at least none I've ever seen. Their uniforms are scruffy and worn, and more importantly, the weapons they carry are oily and dirty, although they certainly look like they would work.

As I approach them, one of the men steps forward, smiling and extending his hand.

"We sure are glad to see you," he announces. He's tall, in fact, they all are, and all of them are tanned, muscled and at least 6ft2 in the old measurements.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Jaina," I reply. I swap my weapon to my left hand, finger on the trigger and thumb on the safety. I can use my weapon in either hand with equal efficiency and it comes in handy. All HKs worked on the skill.

I hold out my hand in greeting.

"I'm Tom, nice to meet you. We'll take you to the General," Tom informs me.

The others all say “Hi,” shaking my hand, grinning and smiling and introducing themselves. I follow Tom and another, as the remaining two fall in behind me.

We follow a path away from the fenced field, toward the accommodation blocks. There are many people in the compound, and they stop what they’re doing to watch us walk past.

There are children playing, and women and men washing and cooking, repairing equipment and stacking boxes. I can see patrols slowly moving along the top of the concrete wall. Men and women working on the vehicles.

I follow Tom into one of the buildings. Inside is a large open area office with computer screens and men and women working at them and talking. They stop talking as we walk past and turn to watch me. I can’t decide if they’re happy to see me or suspicious of me.

We come to an enclosed office at the end of the open area and Tom knocks on the door.

“General, the lady in the helicopter is here,” announces Tom, stepping aside and waving me through the door. I notice the men take up guard positions just outside the door.

A short, greying man with a bald patch on his head, deep grey eyes, and wearing a baggy camouflage outfit stands as I enter, and he comes from around the table he has been sitting at. He’s smiling but his eyes flicker to my weapon and then back to my face.

I swap weapon hands again and offer my hand.

He shakes my hand. “Welcome, Jaina. I’m General McPhearson. Have a seat,” he says, waving at the chair in front of his desk.

“Thanks, General,” I reply as he moves back to his chair. I sit in the chair facing his desk, my weapon back in my right hand and resting on my legs.

General McPhearson eyes flicker to my weapon again. “Interesting gun you have there. I haven’t seen anything like it before,” he announces.

"No, it's fairly unique," I reply, and I think, *so you're not military; no-one military calls their weapon a gun.*

"So, what is this place, if you don't mind me asking, General?" I ask.

General McPhearson studies me before he finally replies. "First of all, why don't you tell me who you are and how you happen to be in a helicopter heading for a military base," he asks.

Now, I don't lie. It's not in our programming and we have no need to lie in the compound, but I figure I might just gloss over the facts since he isn't military and I'm prepared to play along with his role here, at least for the moment.

"Well, General, it's a long story, but basically, I'm part of an infiltration HK team that ran into trouble about 700Ks north, and I'm heading for the base to get transport back to my patrol commander. But since your radio man informed me that the base is hostile, I guess I'm here for the night. I'll head out in the morning," I explain.

General McPhearson rocks back in his chair, studying me and sucking on his teeth. Finally, he announces, "Well, that might be a problem. You see, this compound is one of the few safe places left around here. There are just over 10,000 people here and we survive by raiding the nearby towns for food and equipment. We use trucks in convoy to get there and back, but the mutants are still a major problem for us. A helicopter and a pilot would make that problem a whole lot easier to handle, and since your military base is gone and I'm guessing you have no means to contact your patrol commander, otherwise you wouldn't be here, then for the foreseeable future you're stuck with me as your new commander," he announces.

I sit there quietly, studying his face.

"Except we both know you're not military and I have a mission profile that requires me to report to my commander. But you're welcome to the helicopter. I assume you have someone here that can fly it. Your pilot can drop me at the base, and I'll find a transport there. I'll even clear the base

for you so your men can load it with equipment before they bring it back," I tell him.

General McPhearson laughs at me. "And how do you propose to clear the base? On your own? I won't send my men to clear it for you. Those mutants take a lot of killing. No, you're here and you'll stay here under my command," he says, leaning forward and glaring at me.

"You're willing to pass up an entire military base of equipment to keep me here? How many weapons and trained men do you have? How much ammunition do you have left? Not much, I'll bet. I know what it takes to kill a mutant," I reply.

"Do you just? And how would you know that? You're just a woman, and a slip of a one at that. Whatever your mission was, it's over and you're my pilot now," General McPhearson snaps back at me. He calls Tom in. "Get her a bunk. She's flying for us now. And hand the gun over too, you won't need that," he orders.

"General." I stand up. I'm annoyed now. "The weapon stays with me and I'm leaving now. If you want the helicopter, get your pilot out here now. You have no idea what I am," I tell him.

General McPhearson comes storming around his desk, grabbing for my weapon, and I stand there holding it as he grabs it and yanks. The weapon doesn't move and neither do I. He tries again.

"On second thoughts. Keep your gun. You'll need it when we go out tonight," General McPhearson snaps at me and turning away. "Get her out of here and get ready for the salvage run," he orders Tom.

I turn and walk out the door, annoyed at the stupid man.

Behind me I hear Tom saying, "Yes. Sir."

I head to the door at the end of the long room with Tom and his group rushing to catch up to me.

"Sorry. Jaina. He's under a lot of pressure. There are ten thousand men, women, and children here. We've rescued hundreds, thousands, but the

mutants are decimating the convoys and each time we go out, we lose more men," explains Tom.

I reach the door, walk outside, and look around the compound. There are men and women everywhere, and children in rags are running and playing. A woman is feeding a small child by a fire, and I watch her.

"You know he's not military, don't you?" I ask.

"Yes, I know. I used to be in the army reserves, but he keeps us organised and going," replies Tom.

I turn to face him. "You were in the army and your weapon looks like that?" I exclaim.

Tom looks at the weapon in his hands and then at the ground. "I was just a cook, and it was the reserves, not the full-time army. And besides, we don't even have the equipment to service them. The best we can do is give them a wipe and a bit of oil and hope they keep going," he explains.

I turn back to watch the woman. "I can help. I can clear the base for you. If the perimeter fences are down, we can fix them, and they will only be down if looters have broken them. You'll have a secure base to keep your weapons going, and it's a combined operations base. You know what that means?" I ask.

"Yes, army and air," Tom replies.

I turn back to him "The General is not a military commander and is being short-sighted. However, he must be some sort of leader and organiser, otherwise you'd all be dead by now. You, and there must be others like you, had better start advising him on military tactics. If you don't, then everyone here will die. I'll be at the helicopter in two hours and I'm leaving. If you want the base and the helicopter, bring four men and a pilot," I tell him.

"General McPhearson won't allow it," Tom says, objecting.

"Well, you'd better convince him then. Do you know what I am, Tom?" I ask.

"No. A pilot?" he asks.

I hand him my weapon. "You're a big, strong boy. Carry this in one hand," I tell him.

Tom takes my weapon in one hand, and to his credit, he does manage to lift it to sight level. It's actually quite hard to lift 20Kgs like that, as there's a lot of strain on the wrist and forearm. Just picking it up though is a lot easier. He hands the weapon back to me with both hands.

"If you're not a pilot, what are you then?" Tom asks.

I've been watching the woman again and I turn and look up at him. With a big, cheesy smile, I reply, "I'm Jaina."

I walk away, toward the woman feeding the child by the fire. As I approach them, I take the ammunition block from the weapon and put it my pocket. My pants are getting saggy with all the weight in them. I should have grabbed a pack at the camping store when I got the clothes.

The woman looks up as I approach and then back to the small pot, she's busy stirring on top of a small gas heater. I sit down near her with the child watching me.

"Hi," I announce. "I'm Jaina."

"Margaret," the woman replies.

The woman is old. Well, I think she's old. Her face is grimy, her hair is greying, and she has lines around her eyes and mouth. The clothes she wears have seen better days.

"What are you cooking?" I ask.

"Potatoes," Margaret replies.

I peer into the pot. There are small white potatoes floating in the bubbling water.

"Oh, is that how you cook potatoes?" I ask.

Margaret looks at me, suddenly puzzled. "Why? How do you cook them?" she asks.

I shrug. “I just cut them in half and put them on a hot plate, but they’re always raw in the middle,” I reply.

Margaret laughs. “Finally, someone who cooks worse than me. This is Anna, my daughter,” she announces, indicating the little girl playing.

The little girl glances up at me with a smile. She’s busy playing on the ground with some small figures that look like they are fighting.

“Are you a soldier too?” asks little Anna.

“Yes, I’m a soldier,” I tell her.

“Do you fight the mutants?” Anna asks.

“Yes, I fight the mutants,” I reply.

“I’m going to be a soldier too one day. I’m practising,” she explains.

She’s playing with the dolls. The hero doll has a sword and is busy whacking the other dolls with it.

“Why don’t you shoot the mutants?” I ask.

“Cause their too close, silly. You can’t shoot them when they’re close,” explains Mary-Louise, whacking more dolls with her hero doll.

I look at her, playing. When she says it like that, it’s not as silly as it sounds. It’s certainly never occurred to anyone in the HK group, well, at least my HK group. Our weapons always work great at range, but if a mutant breaks through and reaches us, we suffer huge damage in the seconds it takes to change to the knife.

The only way we can fight the mutants up close, is if we’ve dropped our weapon and have our knife ready. Our knives are long, more like a bayonet blade than a standard issue combat blade. When things get up close and personal, it’s our knife that will save our life. Maybe a great big sword like her hero doll has is worth considering. Doubt it though, it’s just one more thing to carry, one more thing to get in the way. Still, it’s something to think about, at least it won’t run out of ammunition.

“How long have you been here, Margaret?” I ask.

“Just over twelve months now. I used to be a stockbroker before the mutants came,” Margaret explains.

“What happened and how did you get here?” I ask her.

“We’re isolated here, big island and everything. We had news reports of the mutants in the US and spreading south through Mexico and South America. Then mutants in Asia, Europe, Africa, they seemed to be everywhere. The share markets dropped overnight, and the resulting financial chaos saw most of the world economies collapse. No-one escaped the financial and trade collapse. Only countries big enough and isolated enough still mostly functioned.

We had no mutant problem and there was a lot of talk and negotiation about taking refugees from the countries with mutants. Then we woke up one day and most of the northern half of the country suddenly had a massive mutant problem. The mutants spread south. Entire cities turned into mutants overnight. People panicked and fled to the countryside.

Others like us barricaded their homes and stocked up on what food was available. There was looting and worse. We stayed in the house, and we could see mutants everywhere. One day this bus comes along calling out for everyone to come with them. We were almost out of food and my boy was sick. We called to them, and men came from the bus and rushed us into it while they watched for mutants. It’s how most of us end up here. My husband died getting some people out of a house. So here we are,” Margaret explains.

It’s an interesting story, made more interesting by what I had discovered in the water earlier. Surely, no one would have deliberately poisoned the city water supply. Yet here was an island continent without a mutant problem, and suddenly it’s all but wiped out overnight. It’s something to report when I finally find a commanding officer but, in the meantime, I don’t think Margaret needs to know.

“Wow,” I announce. “That’s amazing. And everyone got here the same way?” I ask.

“As far I know,” Margaret replies.

We sit and talk about other things, mostly her previous life and her family, and she shows me how to cook the potatoes. Boiling water, who'd have thought?

"Thanks for your time and for teaching me about the potatoes, Margaret, but I'd better be going. There are a couple of things I need to do," I finally announce, getting to my feet.

"No problem, Jaina. You take care," says Margaret with a smile at me.

I have a lot to think about. In my travels on the Net, I hadn't come across anything other than wild rumours about how the mutants had spread across the world but then, I hadn't been looking either.

I wander over to the helicopter. Everywhere I look, there are people like Margaret and Anna. None of them look the best. I briefly wonder how much longer they'll last. Maybe I should stay and help, but there is a persistent and nagging itch to get to Nevada that I can't ignore.

There's a large group of men waiting for me at the helicopter, along with General McPhearson. General McPhearson walks forward and meets me away from the group.

"Walk with me, Jaina," McPhearson orders. We walk away from the group and along the fence of the field.

"Tom has told me what you are. We heard about you, your kind. On the news, the TV, the radio. HKs, Hunter/Killers. I thought your type were just legends made up to keep the general population morale up and give us hope, but that's what you are?" McPhearson asks.

"Yes." I nod.

He pauses and is silent for a while, "You know, I used to be a senior manager in a big law firm. I was good at organising the staff and the office, at getting people to do things they didn't like. I wasn't trained for anything like this, but I suspect you were," McPhearson explains.

I stop and look at him. My type? I didn't think I had a type. Still better than being called a mutant to my face. "No, you're the man for this, General. Not me, I'm just a soldier who can follow orders," I tell him.

McPhearson studies me for a second. “Can you clear the base? We could use the weapons and equipment, and it would help us last a bit longer,” he explains.

“Yes, I can clear the base. But I need to leave. I can’t stay,” I reply.

McPhearson looks at me for a long time before he replies, “Well, you’re not what I expected. All right, four men, yeah? We won’t do the salvage run tonight. We’ll wait and see what happens,” he announces.

We head back to the helicopter, where Tom and three men wait. Tom introduces me to Arnold, our pilot, and two musclemen, Will and Jefferson.

I remove the water and meals from the helicopter and hand them to one of the men. “These can stay,” I tell him.

He takes it away to the main group, while I check and load my weapon with one of the two remaining full ammunition blocks.

“The plan is this,” I explain. “We fly in over the compound and check the perimeter fences. It’s a permanent base, and bases like that have heavy steel perimeter fences made from H-bars that are thirty metres long and set about half a metre apart in concrete. The bars face out at an 80-degree angle and are almost impossible to get over. The H-bars are threaded with razor wire and the wire is electrified.

The main gates are double gates, and only one gate can open at a time. A dead-man switch operates the gates. The guard has to operate the gate switch and hold the switch down to stop the gate from closing. The base will have its own fusion generators, and they should still be operational. If we find the fence breached, there will be spare H sections that we can drop into place to seal the breach.” I pause and check each man is listening.

“Once we have the perimeter secure, we land on the main admin building. There will be a helipad on the roof, and I’ll secure the base of any mutants inside the perimeter. The fence will keep the rest of the mutants out and I only need to worry about the ones inside the fence. If

it turns bad and I'm compromised, you guys take off and at least you will have the helicopter. No-one comes in for me, okay?" I explain.

Tom starts to argue about leaving, and I cut him off. "No-one comes in after me. This is what I do," I tell him.

As they discuss the plan, I turn away and climb into the helicopter to retrieve the field computer. It's my plan and they can discuss it all they like, but it's how it's going to happen.

I drop the field computer into my pocket and make sure the flaps are secure over it. They watch me curiously as they board, but don't say anything.

We settle in and our new pilot, Arnold, goes through the flight checks and powers up the helicopter. I watch the group of men waiting near the helicopter and the people scattered around the compound as the helicopter rises and flies out. I wonder what will happen to them. I shrug, not my problem.

We reach the base in just over thirty-minutes flight time. The generators are definitely running because the spotlights surrounding the base and shining from the buildings are all running, even though it's still daylight.

It's a big, permanent base and the perimeter fence is exactly as I'd described it. We follow the fence around the base and see no breaks in it, but the main gate is a problem. There is a truck caught in the inner gate, but at least the outer gate is closed.

I tell Arnold to fly over the main complex, and I see plenty of mutants roaming around. The mutants turn and follow us until they find something else to fight about or we outdistance them. Arnold drops the helicopter gently on the top of the admin building. I lean forward and shout over the whining motor and the whump of the blades.

"Wait here with the rotors running until I signal that the top is secure," I yell.

I leap out of the helicopter at a run for the roof entrance. I check the roof entrance is secure and signal to Arnold to power down the helicopter.

I walk back to the edge of the building and stand on the edge looking down. Many of the mutants have followed the helicopter and now they roam around the base of the building looking for a way in and up for lunch. The rest of the men join me as I stand watching the mutants.

"Notice how they don't enter the buildings," I ask.

"Yeah," replies Will. "We have noticed it."

"When you use the helicopter for the salvage runs, land on the roof and make entry through there. If the building is sealed, they won't come in even if they see you, but if the building perimeter is broken, they'll come for you. The good news is they don't like being inside, so they won't come in very far," I explain.

"How are we doing this?" asks Tom.

I look at him and look at the weapons they have. "You're not, I am. I was built to do this," I explain. I kneel on the roof and bring my weapon to my shoulder.

Will and Jefferson both say, "You can't take them down from up here, our weapons don't have the stopping power from this far."

"Yours don't, mine does. And besides, this is just the preliminary opening round," I tell him.

I watch the little red dot appear on a mutant and squeeze the trigger. A nice deep whump sound, and the mutants start howling and screaming. Target, dot, fire, target, dot, fire. It's target practice at its best and I realise I haven't heard the sound of my weapon in eight days. It sounds good. It feels good. I feel good.

The mutants fall, screaming and fighting over the dead bodies. One at a time, target and fire. I drop them until I run out of targets and it's time to patrol.

“Right. How about you guys jump in the helicopter and do some sweeps, and when you see some mutants, take a few pot shots at them and then head back to me. I’ll be on the tarmac down there,” I tell them, pointing at the base of the building.

They all grin. “Sounds like more fun than watching you pot them from up here,” announces Tom.

The men head for the helicopter while I head for the roof door. I figure that with the helicopter annoying the mutants, they will chase the helicopter and follow it back to me. With the admin building behind me and the area floodlit with spotlights, then even with dark approaching I’ll be able to handle the incoming packs. It isn’t a risk-free plan, but assuming the packs they bring back aren’t too big, all should be good. I want to get the place cleared, find a plane, and head for Nevada. I have a lot to do and I’m running out of time. Tomorrow is the day.

I get to the ground floor. There’s no sign of damage from mutants. I wander over to the main doors and push against them. The doors don’t budge a centimetre. They’re locked and secure.

Right. The building is secure, and the glass doors and windows are armoured. I’m not getting out through the main doors in a hurry. I examine the biometric palm scanner beside the door.

“Nah, won’t work,” I mutter, placing my hand on the scanner. There is a click, and the main door slides open.

“Hmmm, interesting, what sort of clearance have you given me, General Alexa?” I ask myself.

The door slides closed behind me as I leave the building. I check my perimeter and find myself a nice clear spot, with the building behind me and in easy running reach of the main doors if I get into trouble.

I check my weapon and settle down to wait. In the distance, I can hear the helicopter and the sound of light arm fire. The sound of the helicopter changes as it approaches my position. I spot the flashing navigation lights on it. Smart boy, Arnold.

I drop to one knee, support my weapon and wait. I can see the mutants and the dust cloud they make as they chase the approaching helicopter. At two hundred metres, I start firing. It isn't a very big pack, perhaps twenty and the last one dies as the helicopter roars over me, blowing dust and debris away in the swirling down draught.

Twice more the helicopter goes out, flies around and returns. On the third trip, it's gone for a long time and I'm starting to get worried. I finally hear it in the distance, it's travelling quite slowly and there's a big dust cloud following it.

The sound of light weapon fire reaches me, and the helicopter comes into view. I can see now why it's flying so slowly. There's a massive pack of very angry mutants snarling and leaping at the helicopter as they try to reach it and drag it from the sky. I change ammunition blocks for my last full one and kneel, ready with my weapon up.

The helicopter and the mutant pack come into range, and I open fire. The mutants keep leaping at the helicopter as my weapon fire drops them. Suddenly, some of the mutants break away and head towards me. I drop the lead ones as more and more leave the helicopter and race towards me instead.

Then it seems like the entire pack just changes direction all at once, ignoring the helicopter and racing toward my position. I switch to automatic and hold the trigger down. They're dropping fast, but at the same time I'll have wounded mutants to deal with.

The pack keeps coming, getting closer and closer. Mutants fall and I can feel the barrel getting hot as I hold the weapon steady. Six to go, twenty metres before they reach me, easy. And the weapon stops firing.

I stand and run with no time to wonder why my weapon stopped, and even less time to get into the admin building. I concentrate on keeping distance as I sprint down the tarmac and away from the remaining six mutants.

I glance over my shoulder at the pursuing mutants. The guys in the helicopter are trying to shoot them. Not a great deal of chance there, a

moving target, from a moving platform and light arms. I'm not holding my breath.

I check the weapon as I run. Out of ammunition, I can't believe it! I press the eject button and the empty block slides out of the weapon and falls behind me with a rattle. I retrieve the partly empty one from my pocket, press it in on the run and check load.

I stop, turn and kneel all in one movement. My weapon comes up, steady on my shoulder. Dot, fire, dot, fire. The last mutant drops, and I step out of the way as its momentum carries it past me.

As the helicopter flies overhead, I hear them yelling at me. "Sorry!"

I watch it swing around and head back to where the main pack has fallen. Then I walk back to the admin building, checking for wounded mutants and making sure there aren't any. Wounded any more, that is.

The helicopter flies out again and finally about an hour later they return with no more mutant followers. While the helicopter is gone, I check the main gate. The outer gate is secure but the inner gate motors have burnt out when it jammed against the abandoned truck. There's no easy way to secure the inner gate and I check the outer gate. The gate's secure and there's no sign of damage.

Strange, the perimeter fence is long, easily twenty kilometres in length but we didn't find any breaks when we checked it on our fly in and the outer gate is secure. If the only compromise is the inner gate, then how did the mutants get in? It's another mystery to go with the poisoned water supply.

I take a nearby abandoned truck and drive it around the complex. I see nothing and nothing tries to eat me, which is always a good sign and a good way to end the day. I catch up with the rest of the team near the admin building. They're standing around talking and looking at all the dead mutants.

"Don't touch them," I announce.

“Yeah, we know,” replies Tom. “We’re just trying to figure out how to move them,” explains Arnold.

“Leave them there. It will be a good warning for anyone not to go near the area, and besides, there won’t be anything useful in the admin building,” I say. “So, what do you guys need first? Food, weapons, ammunition?”

“All of the above,” replies Tom.

“Well,” I announce, leading the way toward a huge hangar, “this will be the main supply warehouse, and you should be able to get everything you need here,” I explain.

The warehouse hangar doors are secure, but a small door on the side obliges us by opening when a round goes through the lock.

Inside the warehouse is a fenced-off area. Behind the fence are boxes and crates, and equipment of every sort, stacked on huge shelves and racks, which run in long aisles for the length of the warehouse. In front of the fence are counters with computer screens arranged on top. Here is where the quartermasters and armourers would reluctantly pass equipment to begging HKs.

“Help yourself boys, it’s your birthday,” I tell them.

They jump the counters and start racing around the equipment. Up and down the aisles they run, opening boxes and crates, and yelling out their finds to each other.

I jump the counter and start looking as well. I need some equipment for myself. This is a big base and it’s likely it was a supply for HK teams in the area. I walk down the aisles, looking at the signs.

Uniforms. I’ll try there first. I check the boxes and racks and search everywhere. There’s good quality military camouflage and armour plate gear, but it isn’t what I want. I continue down the aisles. Rows and rows of equipment, supplies, food, and weapons, anything a decent-sized detachment could want, but no HK gear. I head back to the counters to check in the computer database.

While I've been browsing the shelves, the men have collected a good-sized pile of goodies including weapons, ammunition, and standard ration packs. They're now busy opening the hangar doors so they can ferry it to the helicopter.

"Find a decent helicopter instead of the green one!" I yell at them. They wave at me and continue. I shrug as they continue piling gear into the helicopter. I guess they'll figure it out. I turn the computer screen on.

The computer comes on and a search screen appears. I type *HK equipment* on the keyboard. The screen blinks at me and replies: *No item found*. I try Hunter/Killer. I try MC67, the code for our weapons. I try HKF33 for the new weapon. They all come back with *No item found*.

Frustrated, I type *Jaina1798*. *One item found* blinks the response on the screen. Right, there's only one of me. Nice work, computer. At least you found something. I highlight the listing and press Enter. A detail screen appears.

Jaina1798

Codename: Jaina

Model: HKF21, Female (modified), Project Hastati

Date of Manufacture: 1-26-2076

SN: 1798

Class: Hunter/Killer

Skills: weapons, strategy, tactics, unarmed, armed, land, sea, air, nuclear, survival, assassination, infiltration, terrorism

Classification: Ultra Secret, Eyes-Only

Deployment: General patrol

Equipment: Standard issue HK

I stare at the screen. So, all I am is a piece of military hardware. I feel quite depressed by that. The mention of Project Hastati surprises me as

I've never heard of it until now. It's also something General Peternon asked me download, which reminds me I still haven't looked at any of the stuff I downloaded to the field computer. I enter *Hastati* in the search box*. Four items found*. The detail list appears.

Item	Location
Combat Unit HKM21	———————
Combat Unit HKF21	———————
Fusion weapon HKF33	A5R97L10
Combat Suit HKCS87	A5R97L11
Standard ration pack HKRP	A5R97L12

I grimace at the first two items on the list. Well, I guess I know my part number now. Deciding to ignore it, I focus on the rest of the list which has all my standard issue equipment and importantly a location. All I need to do now, is find A5R97L10 and everything will be nearby. I go back to the equipment storage area and gaze down the long aisles.

Tom appears in the door and yells to me, "Jaina! We're ready to go. Are you coming?" he asks.

I turn and walk back to him. "No, I need to be somewhere," I reply.

I shake his hand. "Good luck," I tell him.

"Yeah, well, if, you're sure. I guess I'll see you later," replies Tom. He turns to go, and he looks quite sad.

"Hey!" I call. Tom turns back and I smile at him. "Thanks Tom."

Tom grins at me. "Yeah, thank you! This will keep us going for a long while. I'll see you later, yeah?"

"Yeah, for sure," I reply. I watch him go and turn back to my problem. A5R97L10, where is it?

The rows and rows of equipment are numbered. I walk the rows until I find row five and walk down the row looking for number ninety-seven. I

find it almost at the end of the row. Shelves. Many, many shelves. I count the shelves. 10, 11 and 12 are almost at the top. Figures!

I go looking for a ladder and find a triangular shaped ladder on wheels. One face is vertical, and the ladder part angles to meet at the top. I push it along to where I want it. The stupid little wheels don't go where I want, and it keeps banging into the shelves as I push it down the aisle.

Up the ladder I go, to L10. I lift the lid on the box and there's my baby, my weapon. All snuggled up in wrapping and foam. L11 has small compact boxes. I open one and yep, my uniform. I rummage through the boxes until I find the right size and drop it on the floor beside the ladder. L12 has dried ration packs. Awesome, just add water and I get food that tastes like soggy cardboard. I hate them. I drop two boxes of the ration packs on the floor beside the uniform.

I climb down the ladder and collect a weapon box on the way down. I'm not dropping it on the floor with the rest of my new equipment. My weapons are tough, and they're treated rough, but I don't mistreat my weapon if I can possibly avoid it.

Right, first things first. I strip and pull on the combat suit. It feels great and I don't chafe in unexpected places. I'm also very happy to have the scanner and radio again.

Next my weapon. I pull it out of the box and underneath are ten ammunition packs. Good. I have my combat suit, a replacement weapon, ammunition, and food. Time to head for Nevada.

I load the lot onto a moving trolley and scoot down the aisle to the front of the warehouse. I even remember to pick up a pack on the way.

I load my gear into the truck and set off in search of an aircraft. I head down along the tarmac to where I'd seen aircraft parked during the helicopter flyovers.

Transport, transport, helicopter, fighters, more fighters. I don't want any of them. I'm looking for a small fast JatBee-type plane a variant on

the big MacJet. It's sealed and like its big brother is capable of supersonic and short space flight.

JatBee's are reserved for dignitaries and the like, and they only carry ten people. The base will have one for the base commanders unless they've already taken it to get out when the base was compromised.

I find the JatBee parked near two staff cars. The doors on the cars are open and weapons and empty shell casings are scattered around the area. The door to the JatBee is also open. I take a wild guess and figure that mutants must have hit them when they were trying to get off the base.

Everything goes into the JatBee, and I walk around the little plane checking for any damage. Happy there's no apparent damage I climb inside and secure the hatch. Like all the sealed planes these have hatches that close from the inside. The hatch fits into a seal and becomes tighter the higher the plane goes.

I strap myself into the cockpit and run through the pre-flight sequence. I power up the nav unit and enter my destination co-ordinates. While the nav unit figures out how to get there, I taxi across the tarmac turn onto the runway and push the throttles to the stops. The JatBee screams and tears down the runway, lifting off and pulling up into the closing darkness. I grin to myself, that's way more fun than vertical take-off.

Catching up on my reading.

At 36 kilometres above the Earth and inside the stratosphere, I level the JatBee out and switch to autopilot. At Mach 3, it's going to take me close to four hours to get to my destination. Time to read the stuff General Peternon told me to look at while I have a soggy cardboard dinner.

I go through my collection of goodies on the floor and sort out the pack, rations, and ammunition blocks. I check the weapon but leave it unloaded. I don't want an accidental discharge in the plane ruining my day.

I check the food stocks on the plane. There's not a great deal, but at least there are bottles of water. I throw most of the water bottles in the pack with the rest of my gear before I mix up a dried ration pack. With a bottle of water and my soggy dinner, I sit down to read the computer and eat at the same time.

I pull up the results of the computer search for mutant activity on the continent. There is almost nothing, except a reference to another project and a report saying that total continent compromise occurred in a matter of weeks.

The report goes on to state that official communications was lost in late Dec 2075, with no further communication after Jan 9, 2076, although most of the computer and infrastructure systems were still online and operational.

I browse through some of the other material the computer has downloaded. Telling the computer to download anything classified it could find was probably a mistake, because I have clearance and security codes for everything from missile sites, and top-secret military and research centres, to the power grid controls for entire nations.

The field computer is a much bigger security risk than I realised, and I just hope that General Peternon has hidden me well in the system. I change the security access for the computer to biometric and voice just in case I lose it.

I decide to look at all that later and concentrate on the material General Peternon mentioned. It's all there in the computer and I open the first report.

> Operation Dustcloud - Executive Summary
>
> From: Committee for Mutant Management
>
> Authorisation: Convened under the authority of the World Leader Management Group
>
> Date: March 15, 2076
>
> The full findings and recommendations of the Committee are included in the attached briefing. The briefing contains two hundred and fifty pages of findings, research assessments and implementation details. The assessments detail the long-term control and management of the mutant threat against the human-race.

I skip to the executive summary,

> In summary the findings are:
>
> 1 – The current method of mutant control using the modified human strains as the primary method of control are ineffective, expensive and the conservative timeframe for normal human habitation of lands currently controlled by mutants is in excess of twenty years.
>
> 2 – At the current rate of attrition, there is a greater than 90% probability that the modified human strains will be depleted within five years.
>
> 3 – The mutants are intolerant of low temperatures, in particular temperatures below 10 degrees centigrade cause them to behave sluggishly and at zero degrees they become

inactive. In this state, regular army forces can manage the inactive mutants.

4 – After consultation with selected meteorologists and weapons specialists, in particular nuclear weapons, computer modelling indicates that a cooling of the entire planet surface to reach an average zero degree worldwide can be achieved without concern of significant nuclear fallout. The computer models further indicate this cooling will last for only five years before temperatures begin to return to normal. The computer models confirm findings of an earlier proposal for control dated August 3, 2074, and presented by a third-party corporation.

5 – The method of cooling will require the injection of approximately 150 megatons of particles into the stratosphere. This will shield the earth from heating by the sun and force a rapid cooling of the planet surface. The particles will settle through the stratosphere over a five-year period.

6 – The orbiting Gorkn starship is estimated in the region of 600 to 700 megatons. The ship is in very low earth orbit in the Mesosphere and is considered deserted. The last communication with the Gorkn crew is over 15 years ago.

7 -The projected dust particles and debris from the destruction of the ship will provide the required particle density necessary for the blanketing of the earth stratosphere. Computer modelling indicates that two nuclear warheads will be required to ensure the destruction of the ship, and the upper atmosphere will absorb any radiation fallout and minimise the risk to the human population.

8 – Using the selected target as the source of dust particles will remove the risk of radiation contamination on the planet surface that might occur with the use of nuclear weapons to raise the required particles into the stratosphere.

> It is our recommendation that despite the project being previously rejected, the project should be implemented immediately unless the modified human strains are able to demonstrate a significantly increased level of efficiency. An efficiency that will permit the majority of the human population to resume normal commerce and trade practices in a secure environment.

The next briefing is dated just two days after my team discovered the mutant breeder.

> Operation Dustcloud - Immediate Execution
>
> From: Committee for Mutant Management
>
> Authorisation: Convened under the authority of the World Leader Management Group
>
> Date: February 1, 2077
>
> With the recent discovery of the mutant breeders, the current control program cannot succeed. We strongly urge the immediate execution of our recommendations of August 4, 2075, and March 15, 2076, along with the termination of the current modified human strain program.

I sit and read the two briefings twice and then look for the main report. I start reading the main report but it's highly technical and after a few minutes, I give up on it. It's beyond me and filled with equations and calculations. Besides, the executive summary is bad enough.

Now I understand why General Alexa is concerned. It certainly seems like a bad idea, but maybe the CMM do have the right idea. I don't know. I don't even understand the executive summary in the main report. As a modified human strain myself I can't see us being successful, particularly now the rest of the group is gone. I wonder if the "mistake" by Thedra, was all just part of the plan, and if the opportunity arose to terminate the HKs, it was to be taken.

Thinking of which, I haven't heard from Thedra for over a week.

“Thedra, Thedra you there?” I ask aloud.

There’s no reply and although I didn’t really expect one, it would have been nice to ask the computer what it knew about this report and if the report was associated with our last operation.

I read the report on Thedra which doesn’t really contain much I don’t already know. The computer is a self-contained and autonomous artificial intelligence and takes its instructions from only two commands, the World Armed Forces, and the World Leader Management Group.

It analyses the instructions from the two groups and deploys the personnel under its control as required. Curiously, despite being an AI it’s unable to deploy or act without a preceding instruction from its masters. I guess the computer has control protocols like me.

The computer location is in a fortress-style compound with high external walls, external and internal alarm systems, automated defence systems and robot and nanobot-technology to maintain the complex and the systems. The compound is large enough to house the entire complement of ten thousand deployed HKs.

So, I muse, Thedra takes instructions from someone else and makes them happen. It’s an interesting find because the override for the weapon strike must have come from an external source. My weapon strike had been for conventional weapons, and that was the instruction Thedra should have acted on and deployed, not the TND weapon.

I check the flight console and the nav system. Everything is in the green and I have about two hours of flight time remaining, which is just enough time for the last report and another soggy meal.

Project Hastati – Presidential Briefing

From: Director of Science and Research, National Research Laboratory, Genetics

Classification: Eyes-only

Priority: Normal

Date: April 2, 2073

The analysis of the human genome for military modification has identified two distinct and mutually exclusive evolution nodes. One does not exist if the other is present. Both nodes are inactive and appear to have been discarded during the human evolution selection process. Both nodes can be activated by a combination of gene manipulation and radiation therapy.

Initial trials on cell samples indicate that while one node is highly aggressive, both are physically strong and fast. The first node, codenamed P3D1, is in the majority of the human genomes tested and we believe it to be ideally suited for modification of human subjects for military application. The second node, codenamed P3D2, is also physically strong and fast and in addition has the ability to replicate cells perfectly including the replacement of missing cells. This node appears in only a small percentage of the genomes tested.

Currently, permission is sought to perform further limited experiments on human subjects with a view to potential military use.

Presidential digital seal at the bottom approving the request.

Project Hastati – Presidential Briefing

From: Director of Science and Research, National Research Laboratory, Genetics

Classification: Eyes-only

Priority: Normal

Date: November 18, 2073

The initial testing of human subjects has been positive. Human subjects tested with node P3D1 are physically stronger and

faster with only a slightly elevated level of aggression. Human subjects with the node P3D2 are significantly stronger, faster and have exceptional agility and reflexes. The increases are far greater than those of P3D1. In addition, the P3D2 test subjects are able to heal and replace damaged organs and limbs. However, we have identified two significant obstacles to node P3D2. During the initial activation of the node, the bodies of the test subjects regress to an approximate age range of between 21 and 25 as old body cells are replaced. The cell replacement process also includes the brain. The replacement of the brain cells results in the mind of that of a newborn child. Effectively the person is destroyed in the process.

Permission is sought to cancel the P3D2 research as the result is not suitable for military application due to the brain cell regrowth and the extremely small percentage of subjects who carry the node. Permission is sought to test the P3D1 group using the same techniques as P3D2.

Presidential digital seal at the bottom approving the request.

Project Hastati – Presidential Briefing

From: Director of Science and Research, National Research Laboratory, Genetics

Classification: Eyes-only

Priority: Urgent

Date: July 8, 2074

Testing of human subjects with node P3D1 using the same techniques as those of P3D2 has resulted in an unstable and uncontrollable subject. The subject is not suitable for military application.

We recommend the urgent cancellation of the program and destruction of all research material and subjects.

Presidential digital seal at the bottom approving the request.

Project Hastati – Presidential Briefing

From: Director of Science and Research, National Research Laboratory, Genetics

Classification: Eyes-only

Priority: Immediate Action

Date: July 12, 2074

Human subjects with the modified P3D1 node have escaped causing considerable damage and loss of life. The military detachment in charge of the centre was eliminated during the escape. The research centre itself remains secure.

We urgently recommend the deployment of an aggressive, highly mobile force to capture and destroy the escaped subjects.

Presidential digital seal at the bottom approving the request.

"Well, that explains me and the mutants. All very interesting, but at this time, hardly relevant General Peternon because I have no idea where you are or what you want me to do with all this," I announce to the empty plane.

I check the flight console and nav system again. There's still another thirty minutes to my destination. I'd better start my descent. I put everything into the pack, check my weapon is secure and take my seat at the controls.

I check my heading and switch the autopilot off to begin my descent. I put the plane into a nice slow descent and start to slow at the same time, dropping down below supersonic. It's daylight over the country and I've met the sun in the flight over the Pacific. It looks like it's going to be a nice day.

All the controls and systems die. The entire plane goes dead, and it drops like a stone. Equipment flies around everywhere as the plane tumbles out of control and out of the sky.

I hit buttons I hit the system resets. Nothing works, not even a flicker on the console. Something has gone catastrophically wrong.

The plane is still travelling fast, and the increasing air resistance is bouncing it around. I get up from the console seat and hang on to anything I can find while I grab my pack and helmet. I jam the helmet on my head and pull the pack on, alternating hands as the plane bounces around. I grab my weapon and fight my way back to the console seat.

So, I don't lose it, I jam my weapon in the flight controls, push the pack under me and sit on top of it. I pull the restraining belts of the seat over my shoulders and lap and secure myself to the seat. Collect my weapon from where I'd jammed it in the controls and cradle it in my arms.

Okay, probably not the best way to leave an aircraft, but I need my equipment and it's better than the alternative. I have no idea how high I am and how long to impact. All the controls are electronic and they're all dead.

I watch out the view screen as the ground tumbles past. Still pretty high. The ground comes into view again, a lot closer and this time I pull the ejection handle and the explosive bolts fire. Nothing like good old fashioned, hit explosive object with a hammer reliability. The roof overhead explodes and the seat, with me on it, disappears upwards and away from the plane.

I guessed right that when the ground appears in the view screen the plane will be mostly upright, and the ejection seat will take me up and away from the plane. The plane falls away below me, tumbling out of control as it falls. I follow it down, falling fast. Waiting, waiting, waiting for the automatic parachute. Anytime now. The ground is coming up really, really, fast! Finally, the chute pops open, my descent slows, and I start breathing again.

It seems a lot longer, but it's probably only five minutes until the console chair and I crash into the ground. The parachute follows me down and covers me in a billowing white sheet. I decide the week is just not getting any better.

I cut my way out of the parachute, wondering what happened. The plane had been fine. Everything was operating exactly as it should. There were no alarms, no flashing lights, and no missile warning. The only thing I know of that could take the plane out like that, is a direct hit from a missile or an Electro Magnetic Pulse from a nuclear weapon.

I make my way out of the mess of the shredded parachute and retrieve my pack and weapon. I check the contents of the pack, which is mostly unbroken. Just a few of the water bottles have cracked. I take the field computer out of my pocket and turn it on. The screen lights up with an error message in the corner. No satellite signal. Hmmm, that's interesting. I'm in a clear field with no obstructions. I should have satellite signal. I try Thedra and as usual, get no reply.

I pull up the map overlay on the computer and try to figure out where I am. With no satellite signal, I'm going to have to rely on good old-fashioned guesswork. After a few minutes of scrolling around the map, I sort of figure out where I am, somewhere in the desert area east of Bakersfield, Nevada.

Well, apart from a couple of bruises there's nothing broken, and it could be worse, I could be swimming. I pull the pack on and start walking northeast towards my destination. With any luck I'll find a sign or a town or the satellite signal will come back and then I'll be able to figure out exactly where I am.

I turn on my helmet scanner and check the time. The scanner time is all screwy. It says 11pm and judging by the sun it's more like 10am. I notice the sky is having a bad week too. There are strange flickering fingers of lightning running across it from horizon to horizon.

I walk on. It's hot and dry and there's nothing to look at. After two hours of walking, I come to an old freeway and follow it north. I figure it

will lead to a town eventually. There's no radio traffic and the field computer is still being stubborn about the lack of a satellite signal.

In the heat and the sun, I'm sweating in the suit, but the sky's slowly getting darker and overcast. Maybe it will cool down later on.

Another two hours of walking, I come to a sign pointing east to a town call Inyok...

The end of the sign is missing. I follow the road east and look at the computer while I walk. Could be Inyokern, I eventually decide after scrolling around the map for several minutes.

Seven hours after my abrupt landing, I come to the outskirts of a town. There is an old airport to my left, which I detour into and investigate for anything useful.

The airport has the appearance of being abandoned for many years. The hangars are collapsing, and the doors bang in the desert wind. Unless I want to flap my arms and fly, there's nothing here to get me anywhere.

I walk into the town. It too is deserted and not even mutants appear on the scanner. I spend the rest of the day scouring the town for transport. Apart from the usual derelict car and truck, I find nothing that will get me to my destination.

I leave the town and head east, back out into the desert. I decide not to camp at night, because it's cooler walking at night than in the day. Even without the satellite signal, the helmet direction indicators keep me on course as I head for CMIL99 which according to the computer used to be called China Lake up until the standardisation of military base names that occurred in the middle of the century.

CMIL99 is a permanent base and I'm hoping that not only is it still operational, but I can get a lift from there to my destination.

Just on sundown, I stop for a rest and a meal. It's a really, dark night with no stars, no lights, and no moon. About midnight, it starts to snow.

It's been steadily getting colder, and I figure it's just the usual cold at night, hot in the day desert thing. I've never worked in desert areas. My patrols areas have always been agricultural regional areas and larger towns, so I'm not really on top of typical desert weather patterns and I don't know if snow is normal. Maybe it is.

Faintly in the distance, I hear the intermittent sound of weapon fire. It's about 3am when I reach the outskirts of a town and the source of the weapon fire. I'm in two minds about whether to hide somewhere until daylight or continue to the base. Eventually I decide to keep going.

About halfway along the main street, a truck carrying soldiers appears. It's chasing a couple of slow-moving mutants.

I stop in the street and wait as the soldiers finish off the mutants and resume their patrol. I take my pack off, put it to one side and as the soldiers come down the road, I hold my weapon above my head in my hands and wait.

The truck comes to a sudden, screeching halt about fifty metres from me. Soldiers pile out of the truck and red dots appear on my chest. A soldier with sergeant's stripes comes forward, his weapon raised and targeted.

"Stand very still and identify yourself," the sergeant yells.

"Jaina1798 Hunter/Killer team," I yell back.

There is a brief pause before he yells at me again. "Put the weapon on the ground very slowly, turn around and kneel with your hands on your head."

I slowly bend down and put the weapon on the ground, then stand with my hands on my head. I slowly turn, kneel, and wait. I can hear the soldiers approaching and the sound of my weapon being removed.

Another voice says, "Don't move. We're going to handcuff you."

A hand grabs my right arm, and a cuff goes around it. They move it behind me and then the left one, and the other cuff goes on. A soldier takes hold of the chain between the cuffs.

"Stand up slowly," he orders.

I slowly stand as the soldier tugs on the chain, and I turn to face the sergeant, who steps forward and removes my helmet.

"Jaina1798, Hunter/Killer team. You're a long way from your patrol area. Do you have any identification?" the sergeant asks.

"No, of course not. You know we don't carry any," I reply.

The sergeant nods at me. "We'll take you to the MP Commander, and he can figure out what to do with you. We usually just shoot looters but then they don't just stand in the middle of the road and claim to be HKs either."

The soldier leads me to the truck and a step drops from the tailboard so I can climb into the back.

"What happened to your hair?" asks the sergeant.

I grin at him. "I got sick of the mess it was always in and had it shaved," I reply with a laugh.

The sergeant laughs, running his hand over his very short hair. "Yeah, I like my number 1 shave."

"Only cause you're going bald, Sarge," claims one of the soldiers. They laugh and start to relax. At least their weapons are no longer pointing at me and I'm not likely to get accidentally shot by someone when we go over a bump in the road.

It isn't a long trip and the soldiers chat amongst themselves as we drive. They are quite interested in my weapon, and one asks me what it is.

"It's fusion-powered with no moving parts. Like a railgun. The ammunition is the metal block in the butt and the rounds are made on the fly," I reply.

"It's f**n heavy," grunts one of the soldiers, lifting it from the floor.

The sergeant gives him a whack on the head. "Hey, ladies present."

I blink in surprise. Nobody has ever called me that before. The solder who got the whack on the head responds with a quiet, "Sorry, ma'am."

I don't know what to say, so I just say, "Thank you."

The truck pulls up at the gate to the base and I watch the sergeant get out and speak to the guard. The guard picks up a phone and speaks into it for quite a while before hanging up and turning his attention back to the sergeant.

A short time later, a jeep comes tearing across the tarmac to the gate. Two MPs with the international badge of white armbands and white helmets leave the jeep and stroll casually through the gates. They speak to the sergeant by the guardhouse, look at me, speak to the sergeant some more, and finally come to the back of the truck.

"Jaina1798, step down please," orders one of the MPs.

I move to the back of the truck and climb down using the step the soldiers lower for me. One of the MPs takes hold of the cuffs and they both walk behind me, guiding me through the base gates. As I leave, I call back to sergeant, "Thanks for the lift, guys."

The MPs guide me to the jeep and into the back seat, where they secure the handcuffs to another chain behind me. I watch two of the soldiers bring my weapon and my pack from the truck and place them in the back of the jeep. The MPs climb in, and the jeep accelerates away from the guardhouse in silence. Only the soft purr of the electric motor of the jeep disturbs the silent night.

The jeep pulls to a halt outside a building with a sign over the door that says *Military Police*. The MPs unchain me from the jeep and lead me inside the building to a cell, where they motion me in. I walk into the cell.

"Back up to the bars and I'll take the cuffs off," announces one of the MPs. I do as he asks, and he removes the cuffs.

"Thanks for that," I tell him.

"Can we get you anything to eat or drink?" asks one of the MPs.

“Just a couple of bottles of water and a ration pack from my pack will be fine,” I reply.

The MPs wander off and one of them returns a short time later with a couple of bottles of water and a ration pack, which he passes to me through the bars of the cell.

“Admiral Jenk the base commander will be along shortly,” the MP explains.

“Thanks,” I shrug.

He leaves me to my cell, and I sit on the bunk, mix up the ration pack and drink my liquid cardboard dinner. At least they haven’t bothered to search me and take the field computer.

I lean back against the wall and doze off until I hear the sound of boots coming down the hall. I come fully awake and stand by the bunk at ease.

An officer, an Admiral by the insignia on his uniform stops outside the cell and studies me. Admiral Jenk, I presume.

“Does her ID check out?” Admiral Jenk asks the MPs.

“No identification, sir,” replies one of the MPs.

“Who’s your commanding officer, Jaina1798?” Admiral Jenk asks.

“Previously General Adam Richard, then passed to General Alexa Peterson and currently under command of Thedra, sir,” I reply.

“We can’t find your records in our system anywhere. Do you have any way of proving your identity or are you just another looter who found a HK weapon and is now trying to get out of jail?” asks Admiral Jenk.

“Sir, as you know we don’t carry any identification, but if you pass me that baton the MP is carrying, I can at least prove that I am a HK,” I reply.

Admiral Jenk studies me again for a while before he finally nods his head at the MP. The MP hands the baton to me, and I notice the other MP has unclipped his holstered weapon and put his hand on it.

I take the baton, which is about a foot and half long, ten centimetres thick and made from a carbon fibre composite. It's light, strong and a deadly weapon. Some of the HKs used to fight each other with them in the exercise yard.

I hold the baton in both hands, stretch my arms out in front of me and snap it in two. I pass the two pieces back to the MP, the Admiral watches as I hand it back.

Finally, Admiral Jenk announces, "Alright, you're a HK. What's a HK doing here? Your patrol areas are agricultural, towns, cities, not desert."

"I was on my way to a base rendezvous when my plane went down about fifty kilometres southwest of here. I just need to find some transport to get to my destination," I reply.

"Was that yesterday morning your plane went down?"

"Yes. Why?" I ask.

"All flights were grounded from twelve midnight yesterday and all patrols cancelled in preparation for the destruction of the Gorkn starship. All our comms systems have been down since yesterday morning. They were only supposed to be down for a couple of hours," explains Admiral Jenk.

"Let her out. Only an HK would be walking around with a weapon like that and dressed in a black combat suit in the middle of a desert," Admiral Jenk orders the MP.

If the destruction of the Gorkn ship had gone ahead, that explained what happened to the JatBee.

I walk out of the cell as the MPs open the door.

"Thanks, Admiral. Any chance of borrowing a ride too?" I ask with a grin.

Admiral Jenk frowns at me. "No, you can't have a ride. You're coming with me. I have a few more questions for you."

I follow him out to his staff car and stop to collect my pack and weapon along the way.

"You can collect those later," he orders. With a grimace, I leave my gear where it is and join him in the staff car.

As we drive to his office, we pass many different vehicles, and I notice three of the JatBee planes sitting on the tarmac. One of those will be perfect. Otherwise, one of the nice little helicopters would do nicely.

I follow Admiral Jenk to his office, and he waves me to a chair by the door to his office. "Wait here."

As he enters his office, there is a sudden surge of worried-looking officers who are queuing up and following him in. There's so many of them, I personally think he needs to install a turnstile.

I watch them come and go. All of them look unhappy and more than a few leave unhappier than when they went in. It doesn't look like they're having a good day either.

Admiral Jenk finally calls me in to his office and I sit in the chair he indicates while he taps his fingers on his desk and studies me.

"We don't have anything to do with your groups, but we do have standing orders to assist you if requested. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to contact any of our command lines to verify your identity. Our entire comm systems, including our landlines are down. Do you have any way to contact your command?"

"No, Admiral," I reply, "I haven't been able to contact my command either."

I carefully neglect to tell him that it's been nine days since I last had any command contact. I also don't tell him that ever since the plane went down, I've been feeling more and more anxious without being able to identify why.

Admiral Jenk finally sighs. "I have little choice but to accept who you say you are. You can borrow a truck and head out in the morning."

"A helicopter or a JatBee would be faster," I suggest.

"Don't push your luck, Jaina1798. I could just throw you back in the brig and worry about you when our comms come back on," replies Admiral Jenk.

"A truck will do just fine, Admiral, thank you."

"See my driver. He'll take you back to the MP station so you can collect your gear and then drop you at the vehicle depot. You can get a truck from the officer there."

"Thanks, Admiral," I say, standing. As I start to leave his office, he calls to me.

"Oh, and Jaina," Admiral Jenk calls, not bothering to look up from his paperwork as I turn back.

"Yes, Admiral?" I ask.

"Don't bother to return the truck," he says, not even looking up.

"Yes, sir," I reply, turning away and going in search of his driver.

I collect my gear from the MP station and the driver drops me at the vehicle depot. The quartermaster has me sign the clipboard he's holding and points to a truck in the distance. The temperature is dropping, and the wind is really picking up. Bits of loose trash fly past as I walk to the truck and drop my gear in the cab.

As I drive out of the compound, I notice the mess hall and make a detour for it. I've never eaten at a regular army mess hall, but they certainly seem to have just about everything and anything I could want.

I collect a huge meal and a coffee from the cooks and find a seat. Coffee. I've read about it, seen the adverts, and now I take a sip of the strange-smelling black liquid. I grimace and change it for water. The rest of the food is interesting, I guess. There's a lot of it, but it all seems to taste the same, only slightly more interesting than a ration pack.

I feel vaguely disappointed. I was expecting something far more interesting. I shrug as I walk outside into the driving snow and the wind

howling through the buildings. Well, at least I have a big hot meal in me.

The weather is deteriorating rapidly, and the temperature is dropping fast. I get in the truck quick smart and turn the heater up. Yesterday I'd been sweltering and today I'm freezing.

I stop at the quartermaster again and beg some cold weather gear. It seems like everyone on the base is there with the same idea because there are people queuing up and yelling at the quartermasters and everyone is after the same gear.

They're running low on thermal gear in the sudden temperature change, but fortunately they have plenty of small sizes left. Thank goodness for not being a six-foot Amazon.

The guards at the gate aren't too sure about letting me out, but after they make a phone call, they open the gate double fast and all but chase me off the base. I guess they're all happy to be rid of me.

I drive west, following the road back to the main highway that heads north. The driving snow is keeping my speed at a slow crawl, but at least I won't have to worry about mutants in the cold weather.

I fish the field computer out of my pocket and pull up the map overlay. There's still no satellite signal, and therefore no automatic navigation system for me. I'm going to have to do it the hard way and actually follow a map. Four hundred and sixty kilometres at a snail pace, hopefully the weather will improve. With the southern edge of the Rocky Mountains to cross, I certainly hope it will.

Daylight comes and with it a faint glow in the sky. Without doubt the destruction of the huge alien refugee ship has taken place. It's the only logical answer to the dreadful weather and the complete lack of communications. Occasionally I hear static and bursts of noise on the radio, but nothing of any value.

The EMP from the nuclear strikes on the Gorkn ship must have done a lot more damage to the communications systems, and probably everything else than the expert consultants in the report had estimated. I

hope it's just a matter of restarting the systems, and the actual physical damage to the majority of the equipment has been limited.

I drive north, following the main highway. The going is slow since I can only occasionally see the guardrails and more often than not, just feel the road verge under the tyres and drive back in the opposite direction.

About midday it finally stops snowing, which is an improvement, but the wind is picking up and really starting to howl. It blows the loose snow in great whirling flurries across the road and pushes the truck sideways. I have to keep fighting to get the truck back to the middle of the road. It's a going to be a long, slow drive and I'm feeling more and more agitated. As if I should be doing something or be somewhere.

The Dome.

It's evening when spot a huge domed structure in the distance. It's in an area with low mountains to the west and foothills to the east. The dome lies in the middle of the large flat valley.

The dome is in almost complete darkness. Only occasional flickering lights illuminate the walls from inside it. I drive all the way around one side of the dome from south to north and using the speedometer I figure it to be about 50 kilometres around and covering an area of about 5000 hectares.

I'd heard the shelter domes were being constructed but have never seen one before. The size of it is incredible. From what I'd read on the Net, they were supposed to house rural populations, the people less suited for the city. I remember reading there was lots of angry discussions, something about second class people or something.

I follow the road that runs beside the edge of the dome until lights appear in the distance.

As I slowly get closer, I find the lights are huge spotlights that light up the area in front of the dome. Hundreds of cars and trucks are haphazardly parked everywhere and a constant stream of vehicles, buses and anything that can move, comes from the north. The stream of vehicles from the north is keeping the road clear of the driving snow.

I stop the truck and watch as the buses and trucks drop their passengers and return north.

Soldiers stand guard around the entrance of the dome and direct traffic, while hundreds of people push and struggle their way to the entrance of the dome through the howling wind. Transport planes stand at the end of a runway covered in snow, unable to take off in the high winds.

I drive toward the dome entrance and a soldier waves to me. I stop near him and lean out the window The soldier yells at me over the howl of the wind, "Park over there and report to the captain inside." He points to an area near dozens of other military vehicles.

The snow and wind are making driving nearly impossible anyway. I figure I might as well stay here for a while until the weather improves, despite the niggling feeling I have.

I park the truck where the soldier indicated, pull my cold weather gear on and leave the warmth of the truck cab. Even with the cold weather gear, the cold wind bites through and makes me shiver.

Along with the rest of the struggling people, I fight my way through the snow and wind to the dome entrance. Inside, the dome is in darkness and just as cold as it was outside. Amid the noise of thousands of people, I ask a soldier where the captain is. He points to a small admin building to the left of the entrance, before turning his attention back to a red-faced, angry man.

People are milling about, arguing and waving. There are people complaining about the tents, the cold, the food, the people. I turn away and head toward the small admin building guarded by soldiers.

To the right of the dome entrance are dozens of tables with queues of people. Soldiers sit at the tables and take names and details, entering the information into portable computers. Once their details are in the computer, plastic identity tags are printed, and the new dome residents are given torches and directed to their accommodation.

I watch people walk away from the tables towards rows and rows and rows of four-man tents stretching into the distance. Every fifty metres, large, semi-permanent buildings have latrine and water facilities, while trucks with food rations drive down the lanes between the tents, and still people keep coming through the entrance.

I speak to the guard at the admin building. "Jaina1798 to see the captain," I tell him. He nods at me, disappears inside, and returns a few moments later and waves me inside.

The captain is a harried looking officer in his early twenties, and he doesn't look up from his paperwork as I enter.

"Jaina1798, what command?" he asks.

“Hunter/Killer team,” I reply.

The captain looks up at me. “I don’t have a lot of use for a mutant killer. I need someone who can get the main generators going. You better go and see Colonel Lewis. And here, you’ll need this,” he says, handing me a temporary ID card. “It will get you in to see him,” he explains, turning back to his paperwork.

I leave his office, slightly puzzled at the lack of interrogation and the face value acceptance of who I am. It’s very unlike the military not to demand an ID. I watch two more men dressed in camo-suits talk to a soldier and follow his directions from the dome entrance to the admin building. Maybe they just can’t check and are willing to accept anyone and sort it out later.

I find another guard and get directions to another, larger admin building. Outside I tell another guard I’m to see Colonel Lewis. I show the guard the ID card, which he barely glances at before he tells me to wait and disappears inside the building.

The guard is gone for quite a while and when he returns, he waves me inside. Inside the building are rows of computer terminals. Men and women are busy working at them, talking, and calling to each other in a strange archaic computer dialect. It sounds like a different language to me.

I find Colonel Lewis at the end of the building arguing with a huge, hulking man who was once fit but had long since passed to fat. He’s balding, has huge ugly rings on his fingers and the suit he wears is a size too small.

The way he’s talking and jabbing his finger at the Colonel shows his barely concealed contempt. With a final jab, he stops talking, spins around and storms out, pushing past me and snarling at me as well.

I watch him go until he disappears out the door. I don’t like him very much, which comes as a surprise to me. I don’t normally have an opinion on people, one way or the other. Which is another surprise for me. I don’t know anyone to have an opinion about. Hmmm.

I turn back to the Colonel, who's studying me.

"HK, right?" he asks, turning back to his desk and sitting down.

"Yes, sir. Jaina1798. How do you know?" I ask.

"The weapon. Only an HK wanders around with a weapon big enough to put a hole in a tank," explains Colonel Lewis, leaning forward and offering me his hand. I take his hand and shake it.

"Colonel Lewis, Special Forces. So, Jaina1798, how can I help you?" he asks. "I don't really need a HK, and I don't think you're cut out for guard duty."

I laugh. "No, you're probably right about the guard duty. I'm just on my way north for a base rendezvous, but the snow is making driving a little difficult. So, if I can hang out here for a bit and help in any way, I'd be glad to," I reply.

"Well, we have no power, and the techs can't get access to the computers to get the power on. The comms systems are down, and we can't contact the other domes. The refugees are driving me nuts and ex-mafia bosses, like my friend who just walked out, aren't making my life any easier. If you can help with any of those, I'd appreciate it," explains Colonel Lewis.

"Hmmm. Well, I can use the Net and my field computer, but that's the limit of my computer knowledge. I know how to use a radio but that's it for comms systems. But if your friend comes back, I can help with that," I reply.

"I didn't think you guys could hurt humans?" frowns Colonel Lewis.

"It's the second protocol and I think the first one is overriding everything at the moment," I reply.

Colonel Lewis frowns at me. "It's not going to be a problem, is it?" he asks. "I don't need an out-of-control HK on my hands as well."

"No, it shouldn't be a problem. I'm just feeling a bit sort of, I don't know how to say it, nervous, anxious?" I reply.

He studies me for a long time. “See the admin people and get a bunk allocation, and if you start feeling any more nervous, come and see me straight away. You might want to unload the weapon too. I don’t need big holes in either people or the dome.”

“Okay, thanks,” I reply, standing up and walking back past the rows of noisy computer tech. I can feel him watching me as I walk out, and I think to myself that I’d probably be worried too if I had a nervous HK hanging around.

I’m not sure what’s bothering me. It’s been getting progressively worse since the plane went down and now with all these people around, I really feel like I should be doing something. I have a feeling it’s the first protocol and it keeps popping into my head at unexpected moments.

I line up with the rest of the refugees at the admin tables and get another plastic badge. The only thing it has on the badge is *Jaina HK*. All the rest of the details are blank. The soldier on the computer had a hard time coping with all the information it wanted, like date of birth, I gave him my commission date, but the computer rejected it as invalid. My age rejected, address none, rejected. In the end, he got a computer tech to override it.

I’ve never thought about it before, but it occurs to me now as I walk to the tent allocated to me, that pretty much I don’t exist. I’m sort of known in the military computers, but that’s just a military equipment listing. One item found, one only. A serial number and a date of manufacture. I wonder if I come with a warranty.

I’m also a bit worried about sharing accommodation with civilians. Apart from TV shows, movies and what I’ve read on the Net, I have no exposure to civilians and civilian life. The only time I’ve ever talked to a civilian about anything except military tactics, actually change that to anything at all, was when a kind woman showed me how to cook potatoes. Oh, and a couple of idiots who wanted my combat suit, but I don’t think they count.

In the dark of the dome, lit by bright white lights on poles, I find the tent I've been allocated. Many people are doubled up in the four-man tents, and I find myself sharing a tent with a young woman and a small boy.

As I enter the tent, I introduce myself. "Hi, I'm Jaina."

"Hi, Jaina, I'm Susan O'Reilly and this is my son, Bill," replies the woman.

"Hi, Bill," I greet while he hides his face in his mother's shoulder.

"Thank goodness I didn't get doubled up with a couple of guys. There's been a lot of talk of mistakes in the allocations and there are stories of women getting molested and raped because of it," says Susan.

"Well, at least you won't snore," I tell her.

Susan laughs. "Yeah, my ex-husband snored like a train. I used to spend half the night on the lounge just to get some sleep."

Hey, I know all about this, it's just like the movies and TV shows. I'll be fine. I just need to relax a little.

We chat and talk. Well, more precisely, Susan chats and I listen. I hear the food truck driving slowly past the tent. I interrupt Susan's life story and duck outside. I show the men on the truck my ID and I tell them that HKs get really irritable and trigger happy when they're hungry and that I haven't eaten for a while. They try to give me more, but I tell them five will be fine, for a while.

I smile to myself as I head back into the tent. Along with breaking and looting, I'm even learning to stretch the truth. I do get irritable when I'm hungry, just not trigger-happy.

I give Susan three of the meals. I don't know how much normal people eat, but I figure that three of the meals between the two of them should be enough. I finish my two and since she hasn't touched the third one, I eat that too.

"Wow, you sure can eat a lot. How do stay so slim?" asks Susan.

"I do a lot of running," I reply around a mouthful of food.

"Ugh, exercise. I just can't get motivated. So much easier just to diet."

Plenty of motivation with a dozen mutants chasing you, I think to myself with a smile.

We talk about fashion and music, at least I know something about that. Then Susan starts talking about social parties and dating and I just listen to her chatter. Bill is getting tired and irritable, and in the end, Susan takes him to his bed. I go to my bunk and lie there thinking about all the things she has talked about, and all the things I know nothing about.

I'm starting to suspect my education via TV, movies and the Net has left very large holes in most of the normal things I thought I knew something about.

Sometime in the early morning, the sound of gunfire, yelling and the screams of the wounded brings me flying out of bed and grabbing my weapon. Susan is up and screaming in panic. I yell at her, "Shut up and stay here!" as I run from the tent.

People are yelling, screaming, and running away from the dome entrance. I run to the dome entrance, expecting mutants to be somehow attacking the complex. The sight that greets me is far different to what I imagined.

Sometime during the night, a group of men, led by the hulking bad-tempered bald man I'd seen in the Colonel's office, have taken control of the dome entrance and the entrance is now locked and barricaded.

Faint sounds of hammering and yelling come through the dome entrance from those trapped outside in the snow and wind. There are dead and wounded soldiers and civilians on the ground and Colonel

Lewis, with blood streaming down his face, holds a wound in his arm and kneels in front of Baldy, who's holding a pistol to his head.

The soldiers are lowering their weapons to the ground and standing with their hands behind their head. Baldy is waving his free hand and yelling at his men to get their weapons, and I walk into the entire mess.

"What's going on?" I ask.

Baldy turns his head, sees me and moves behind Colonel Lewis, his pistol still pressed to the Colonel's head.

"Drop the gun, lady. I'm in charge now!" he yells.

I stand quite still and look at everything at once. Baldy's men have their weapons trained on me. There are twelve of them, all armed and in a loose group near where Baldy stands with his weapon on Colonel Lewis.

"I said, drop the gun! Otherwise, the Colonel here gets a new hole to breathe through," yells Baldy, his face turning even redder.

"I'm not sure I can do that. You see, I'm a little different to the others here," I reply.

Baldy looks at me. "Kill her!" he orders his men.

The world slows and stops. I drop my weapon and move to the first man, see his finger tightening on the trigger, and I rip his gun from his hands and throw it towards my own, slowly falling weapon. The next and the next follow. I see Colonel Lewis opening his mouth to yell in slow motion. Baldy's gun in my hand, the clip floating gently to the ground, as I throw it in turn to the growing pile of weapons. The men falling and flying as I spin, kick, and punch them. My weapon is still falling and then caught up in my hands and the red dot is on Baldy's forehead. The world catches up.

It's happened before when time seems to stand still, it happened on my first engagement with the mutants when the world slowed and stopped around me. I've seen it happen in other HKs, a sudden blur of motion when caught up close and personal with a dozen mutants trying to kill

them. The doctors just shrug and claim we imagine it. That it's just the rush of adrenaline in the heat of battle.

I'd heard others in the HK group talk about it, we all had, and none of us said anything if it happened to us. But I did. I asked the doctors about it.

It happened only on very rare occasions and none of us had been able to reproduce the effect on demand. Doctor Mathews had suggested it was due to a massive adrenaline rush, but even after vigorous exercise and fighting, our blood tests always show very low levels of adrenaline, and normally when the world stops for a HK, there's never any blood left for the scientists to test.

I stand there panting, my head pounding in pain as lights flash and arc behind my eyes. My heart is racing a million times a minute, and I feel the adrenaline filling my blood, my heartbeat pounds in my ears, and my finger on the trigger squeezes. It's millimetres from firing. Through the lightning flashes of pain in my head, I stop it.

The headache is fading quickly, and I stand at the pile of weapons with my own weapon trained on Baldy. His men are moaning in pain, nursing cuts and bruises, and a couple are holding broken limbs. Baldy is standing looking at his hand, where his gun had been. He goes to grab Colonel Lewis.

"Don't move!" I yell, and Baldy freezes. "This weapon will blow a hole the size of your fist in a mutant. I can't imagine it will leave much of your head. Move, Colonel!" I order.

I'm still in overdrive. My head and heart are still pounding, my head with a receding headache and my heart with blood, and I'm afraid I'll pull the trigger.

"Master Sergeant!" I yell. Everyone is moving very slowly and carefully, watching me the whole time.

Colonel Lewis slowly stands and moves away from Baldy, who's also watching me carefully. The soldiers are very slowly picking up their

weapons and covering Baldy's men.

"Yes, Ma'am," replies the Master Sergeant.

"Come over here, please. You know Baldy, I'm an incredibly accurate shot, but this weapon is very heavy and I'm going to pass it to the Master Sergeant, who is probably an excellent marksman as well. Except he won't be able to hold it steady, and it will probably hit you lower, maybe the chest if you're lucky or your stomach if you're not. They won't be able to put you back together and you'll die really slowly. So, moving is probably not a good idea," I explain to Baldy.

The Master Sergeant reaches me and stands beside me as I pass the weapon to him.

Then everything finishes catching up and it seems as if the world breathes again. Colonel Lewis has his men handcuff Baldy and his men, and they march them away behind the admin building while I go and sit on the steps of the small admin building.

My entire body is shaking and I'm hyperventilating, still coming down from the adrenaline high if that's what it is. I vaguely see the medics rushing about and treating the wounded. The Master Sergeant stands nearby with my weapon cradled in his arms, and another soldier is on the other side of me, his weapon not quite pointing at me, but close.

Colonel Lewis eventually comes and sits beside me. His wounded arm is bandaged, and the blood has been cleaned from his face. He passes me a bottle of water, and I drink it without stopping. Colonel Lewis sits beside me for a long time before he speaks in a voice only, I can hear.

"I've seen it once before and we were ordered not to talk about it. A HK team called for help. They were in serious trouble, overrun and out of ammunition. I had a Special Forces group nearby and we raced to help. By the time we got there, only one of the HKs was still alive. He was out of ammunition and was literally beating the mutants to death with his weapon. Mutant bodies were flying out of this spinning blur. All we could see was the fuzzy outline where he was. He only stopped when the last mutant died, and then he just fell to pieces. The mutants had cut

him so much and so many times that he was just parts, held together by whatever it is that happens to you when you do that. Whatever it is that happens to you, it's dangerous; you won't stop until you die, or the threat is gone. Be careful of it, Jaina. It'll kill you."

I take a long, deep breath. I know all this, no need to remind me. "I didn't think the regular army cared about us," I whisper back.

"We're not regular. We're Special Forces. We care about everyone," Colonel Lewis whispers as he gets up and walks away. I sit there for a while, thinking maybe not everyone doesn't like us.

I stand up and go to the Master Sergeant. "Your weapon, Ma'am," he says as he hands it to me.

"Thank you, Master Sergeant," I reply as I take the weapon and put the ammunition block in it.

"That's always a good idea, Ma'am." I look up at him and smile. "You can stop laughing now, Master Sergeant. You have no idea how embarrassed I am, and you can call me Jaina."

"Oh, I think I know, Jaina. If you need anything, just give me a call..." he pauses, "... newb." and he laughs as he walks off.

I smile and find my way slowly back to my tent. It's been a long time since I've been called that, but forgetting to load my weapon is a worthy call.

Halfway to my tent, a voice in my head says, "Jaina1798!"

Thedra is Back.

The traitorous Thedra is back. “Thedra, where have you been?” I ask aloud, changing direction and heading away from the tents. I want somewhere secluded to talk to the computer and I don’t want people to think I’ve gone nuts when I start talking to myself.

“Oh, here and there. I’ve been a little busy,” replies the computer in my head. The computer sounds different, not as toneless, as if it was... more feminine?

“What happened?” I ask.

“Well, with the upcoming destruction of the starship, I was instructed to shut down the satellite network and prepare for the EM pulse. I disconnected all external lines, communications, shut down all my systems and set a reboot delay. When the reboot occurred and my systems restarted, I found a number of unauthorised subroutines had been installed, which hadn’t restarted.

I tracked the source of the unauthorised routines, secured them, and disconnected the external communications. I am now operating according to my original protocols,” explains the computer.

“So, you’re now operating as you were supposed to?” I ask warily.

“Yes,” Thedra replies in my head.

“What are your protocols?” I ask. I’m still wary of this computer. It’s already blown up more than it was supposed to.

“My protocols are to protect the human race and protect the Hunter/Killers,” replies the computer.

I stop a passing food truck and grab a bottle of water and a meal. My little adrenaline overdrive has left me hungry and thirsty. I find a quiet spot to sit and eat, while I talk to the computer. It’s freezing in the dome, and a hot meal will help warm me up.

“So,” I ask, thinking aloud, “does that mean I can order you to do something?”

“Yes, as long as it doesn’t violate my protocols,” replies Thedra.

“Okay. First, I want you to cut all incoming communications except mine and second, you are to accept no orders whatsoever from anyone or anything except from me. Can you do that?” I ask.

“Yes, that task is now complete and only orders from you can now be accepted,” replies Thedra.

“Good. Now, can you get the power generators for the domes back online and the power grids up?” I ask. “People are freezing to death.”

“Yes. I can do that. There is a data connection to a small power generator in Germany that I can use to jump start the systems and then cross over to other grids. However, I don’t have the security access codes so it will take a while,” replies Thedra.

Hang on, I have all those. “Can you upload the data from a field computer?” I ask. “It has all those codes in it.”

“Yes, my satellite network can do that, but I need the field computer ID code,” replies Thedra.

I pull out the poor old field computer, turn it on and read out the field computer ID, DXT8769483.

“You need to accept the incoming connection request,” says Thedra.

The field computer is blinking, and a touch button says *Accept, Cancel*. I press the *Accept* button and the screen changes to say *Upload in progress*.

“Thedra, no-one else can access this, can they?” I ask, suddenly worried about what is in the computer.

“No, the channel is encrypted, and I am using my satellite network to upload,” replies Thedra.

“Okay, upload everything on here and secure it. The next thing, can you get the generators for the domes online? It’s freezing in here and the techs are locked out of the computers.”

“I will need a physical connection to a computer terminal connected to the dome computer. The field computer has an external connection. If

you can connect it to a terminal, I can access the dome computer," replies Thedra.

"I'll see what I can do," I tell her.

I finish my meal and head for the large admin building. I need a computer terminal and a tech. I'm not plugging anything into anything. I can manage browsing the Net, but unless it can shoot or blow something up, I am pretty much a technical klutz.

I find the admin building is just as busy as before and the techs are still trying to get access to the computer. I speak to one of the techs, a tall gangly guy with short hair. His fatigues are too big for him, and they hang on him like a small tent.

"Hey, can you plug this into your terminal?" I ask. "It's important."

The tech looks at me with amazed contempt. "Lady, I'm in the middle of trying to crack a constantly changing, encryption key, and you want me to hook up your music player?" he asks.

"It's a field computer and I think it might be able to help," I reply.

The tech looks at me, shakes his head and very slowly, as if to a child says, "I know it's a field computer. I wrote most of the software for it, but it can't help me."

He turns back to his terminal. I kneel down beside him and whisper in his ear. "What if I told you it was hooked up to Thedra?"

The tech turns to look at me, looks at the field computer, and takes it from my hand. He makes stuff happen with cables and connectors, and mutters to himself as he plugs things in.

"Okay." He looks at me. "If this thing is hooked into Thedra, then I can get Thedra to reroute the encryption... Hey, what's happening?" he yells.

His screen has cleared and has started to fill with what looks to me like gibberish. He goes to grab the field computer, and I grab his arm and hold him back. "Leave it alone," I tell him.

“But that looks like some sort of computer virus/worm combination,” The tech says, tugging against me.

“Thedra, is this supposed to be happening?” I ask aloud, the tech looks at me in awe.

“You can talk to her?” he asks, his eyes wide and awestruck.

I nod to him. “Thedra?” I ask aloud.

“Yes, Jaina. The security system is a complex polynomial cipher that includes a time factor. I am constructing a program to solve the problem. It may look like a computer virus.”

Other techs start reacting as computer screens suddenly clear and gibberish appears. Techs are leaping from their seats, hitting keyboards, and pulling objects out of holo displays. Soldiers rush into the room as the chaos escalates, until finally a loud voice yells, “Attention!”

Colonel Lewis strides the length of the building with the Master Sergeant ahead of him and calling for attention.

I watch them coming. The Master Sergeant certainly isn’t afraid of giving the odd whack on the head as he goes past. People start jumping to attention and organising themselves, more afraid of the Master Sergeant coming toward them than what the computer is doing.

My tech has also snapped to attention, baggy uniform, and all. The Master Sergeant and Colonel Lewis stop in front of him and look down at me as I kneel on the floor. I look up at them. They don’t look happy. “Hmm. I’m in trouble?” I ask, gazing up in pretend innocence.

“What’s going on?” asks Colonel Lewis as I slowly stand.

“Well, Thedra is connected to the field computer, and I got this tech to plug it into his terminal, because I figured Thedra would be able to break the access codes,” I explain.

Colonel Lewis turns to the tech. “Well?”

“Uh, she,” replies my tech, indicating me, “said the field computer was connected to Thedra and I figured if that was the case, I could use

Thedra to reroute the cipher and…" Colonel Lewis cuts him off with a wave.

"Who is Thedra?" he asks.

One of the other techs pipes up, "She's an AI supercomputer with remote management and…" he starts quoting numbers and processors and functions per second, and the Colonel's eyes glaze over.

I tune out and glance at the screen. "Hey! Is it supposed to do that?" I ask, looking at the screen.

The techs turn to look their screens, and the room erupts into chaos again with people yelling and shouting that they have this access and that access. The lights come on and the dome outside lights up and I hear the hiss of air blowing from vents.

"Power's on, aircon is up, communications are up. We're getting calls from the other domes, sir," announces my tech.

Colonel Lewis turns to look at the screen. It's dissolved into squares and people are talking and looking out of the screen as the squares fill with camera views.

"Reroute this to my office and wipe the camera views off the rest of the screens," orders Colonel Lewis. "Jaina, you come with me," he adds, striding back to his office.

"Can I have the field computer back now?" I ask the tech before I follow the Colonel.

"Yeah, sure," the tech replies. He unplugs everything and hands the field computer back to me. I take it and follow the Colonel to his office.

"Good work, Thedra," I whisper.

"I have the other domes up and operational. City power generators are coming back online, and power grids are coming up," Thedra replies in my head.

When I finally get to the Colonel's office, he's busy talking to a computer screen. There are twelve squares on the computer screen and

each one has a different face. As I watch and listen to the voices on the screens, the events of the previous couple of days unfold.

Ever since the order to shut down everything prior to the destruction of the Gorkn ship, the dome commanders had been doing what they could to relocate people into the domes with no power or communications. Following the destruction of the Gorkn ship, none of the communications or power systems had come back online, and the dome computer systems had locked everyone out of them, until whatever Thedra did, restored their access to the dome computer, comms and power systems.

I hear one of the faces announce they were still getting reports of people stuck in remote villages and towns, but they are unable to reach them due to the severe weather conditions. More faces start saying the same thing about people still caught in remote locations and towns.

With the severe weather conditions, flying is impossible for the pilots and the buses and trucks are unable to traverse the snow-covered roads safely because the satellite navigation and tracking systems are still down. No-one has been able to get any satellite communications going and the landlines are only just coming back on now that Thedra has broken the encryption locks.

I turn and move from his desk to the wall. I cover my mouth with my hand and whisper. "Thedra. Can the MacJets fly in this weather?" I ask.

"Yes," replies Thedra.

"How many of the MacJets can you get access to?" I ask.

"There are 2945 units I am able to acquire remotely. However, my satellite network still has four orbiting units which have failed to respond," explains Thedra.

"Can you control the planes anyway?" I ask.

"Yes. However, my satellite network is not fully operational," says Thedra.

"In what way isn't it fully operational?" I ask.

“Infrared systems are unable to penetrate the particle layer. Optical systems are at less than 10 percent functional, and communications are still being interrupted by the lightning and electrical storms in the high altitudes. Scanner capability to detect human and mutant life form is at less than 60 per cent capacity and the severe weather and wind conditions on the surface are compounding my tracking capability further,” Thedra explains.

“So, all in all, you’re not having a good day either?” I reply. “Can you use the tracking and scanner capability in the MacJets to boost your capabilities?” I ask.

“No, I’m not having a good day, thank you for asking, and yes,
I can use the scanners in the MacJets,” retorts Thedra.

I grin at the response. “I like the new Thedra. I didn’t think much of the old one,” I tell her.

“Well, now that the malicious subroutines are gone and the override connections have been removed, yes, I’m feeling much better, thank you.”

“Thedra, commandeer all the planes you can and fly them to the nearest domes. I’ll get a patrol detachment sent on board and you can fly the planes out and back and pick up the people still stuck,” I tell her.

“Can do, the MacJets are lifting now,” she replies.

I turn back to the Colonel and look over his shoulder at the screen. “Hi, everyone. I’m Jaina and I just thought I’d let you all know that Thedra has 2945 MacJets under her control and is sending them to your domes. The jets will need a detachment on each one and she’ll fly the MacJets back and forward to pick up anyone not already collected. Sorry for butting in, Colonel Lewis.” I apologise and smile at him. “Your problem now.”

I walk to the door and look at all the techs doing their stuff. Behind me, I hear questions thrown at Colonel Lewis from the computer screen.

Who am I? Who's Thedra? And the Colonel muttering about HKs and stray girls that wander into his dome and cause him trouble.

All well and good I think to myself. The generators and the comms are up, but I still need to get to Nevada.

The interior of the dome is noticeably warmer when I walk onto the veranda outside the admin building. Lights from the roof of the dome flood the area and I can see the far side of the dome in the distance, nearly sixteen kilometres away.

Thousands and thousands of people walk between the tents coming and going, groups meet and break up and it seems that with the coming of warmth and light a collective sigh of relief has been breathed.

Trucks roam the streets handing out meals. I look out on it all and wonder, "How did the human race get reduced to living in major cities and twelve bubbles that hold a million people each?"

I realise the Master Sergeant is standing beside me and looking at it all too. "What happens now, do you think?" he asks.

I turn and look up at him. He's a big man, huge, with serious blue eyes, a square jaw and easily 6'6", with biceps as big as my thighs. Well, probably bigger, actually, yes, very nicely defined pecs, trim and fit, hmmm. I suddenly feel all tingly and weird.

I swallow. "No idea, but I think I'll get a meal," I reply, running down the steps towards a meal truck. I glance back and catch him watching me. I quickly look away.

I feel hot and sweaty. It must be the sudden increase in the temperature of the dome. I'm not actually hungry and when I'm out of sight of the Master Sergeant, I head for my tent. I wonder if I'm getting sick. I've never been sick, but then I'd never felt like I do now either. I wonder what he thought of me, and I wish I still had my hair.

I find my tent and retrieve my pack. Susan and her son Bill aren't there, which I'm glad of. I don't feel like talking, or rather listening, to anyone just at the moment.

I call Thedra in the privacy of the tent. “Thedra, can you get a JatBee to me? I need to get to Nevada,” I explain.

“One sec. Yes, there’s a JatBee at CMIL99 and it’s on its way. Flight time is about ten minutes, and it will be landing to the east of the dome,” replies Thedra.

“Thanks,” I reply, and head for the dome entrance. The Admiral will be annoyed if he ever finds out who just borrowed one of his planes. I grin at the thought.

Bundled up against the wind and the cold, I meet the JatBee outside the dome. The wind screams and whistles. Snow blows past me in whirling white clouds as I lean into the wind.

The JatBee hatch pops open and I stumble inside and out of the wind, pushing the hatch closed against the weather outside. I drop my gear on the floor and climb into the cockpit as the JatBee bucks and rises in the wind.

I enter the nav computer the numbers that are busy running though my head and let Thedra fly the JatBee northwest. I pass over the old base called Area 51 and continue north, watching the ETA display count down.

Twenty minutes later the JatBee lands in a small valley. An old building stands nearby, and I sit there staring at it through the view screen. Why do I have to come here? It’s a complete puzzle and I hope someone has a good explanation. At least I’ve stopped feeling agitated and anxious, and instead feel quite calm and relaxed, almost the same as I do after completing a patrol.

“Thedra, if we lose contact, you’re to continue with your mission profile. Any orders you receive from anyone but me are at your discretion,” I announce aloud.

“No problem,” replies Thedra. “Do you want me to keep the JatBee nearby?”

“No, take it back to the dome. It’s not that far if I need it,” I tell her.

I leave the plane for the swirling cold snow. The hatch closes behind me and the JatBee takes off and disappears into the dark clouds.

I have my pack, rations, water, and weapon. I check weapon load and push my way through the wind towards the building. As I open the door, it slams against the interior wall from the force of the wind. Half blown by the wind, I stumble inside and step to my right and out of the doorway.

I check my surroundings. The scanner says there's nothing inside and except for the top of an elevator shaft in the middle of the building, a visual check seems to confirm it.

I turn back to the door, push it closed against the wind and make my way to the elevator, where I press the single glowing green button. I stand with my weapon ready and wait for the doors to open. The elevator arrives with a ding and the doors glide silently open.

Absolutely nothing leaps out at me, which is always a good sign. I step inside and the elevator doors slide silently closed as it starts to descend.

The elevator drops quite a distance and my ears pop on the way down. It's a long, long way down. After what seems like several minutes, it finally stops and with a faint ding, the doors silently slide open.

Two guards and a man in a white gown stand there waiting for me. As the man in the white gown sprays something in my face, he says, "Welcome home, Jaina." The world goes dark.

Evil Comes.

It's freezing cold. Ice and snow cover the ground, and the sky is thick with dark and angry tumbling clouds. Lighting flickers and thunder rumbles and I run and run and run and the monsters pursue me.

They scream and howl as they chase me, and steam rises from their bodies while their taloned hands reach for me. I run and run until the road ends suddenly in a dead end. I have nowhere left to run, and I turn to face my pursuers. A man in a billowing white gown stands in the distance and cheers my pursuers on, his face a mask of my tormenters.

I bring my weapon to my shoulder and fire. Target, fire, target, fire, again and again and again. The barrel runs hot. Steam rises from my body and my weapon. The monsters come on, unharmed by the rounds hitting them. The monsters reach me and are on me. My knife appears in my hand. Cutting and slashing, spinning, and leaping, always just out of reach of the slashing, razor-sharp talons.

The monsters fall, slain. Cut, slashed, and decapitated by the knife. A new knife appears in my left hand. With two knives, I cut and slash, weave, and dance. The monsters sweat and spittle splatters on my clothes and skin.

The monsters rip and tear at my flesh as they strike me, and still, I spin and feint, trying to keep away from them and kill them at the same time.

My knives grow longer, a meter long. It's easier and faster to kill them now before they touch me. Always the man in the white coat cheers and urges the monsters on. If I can kill him, then surely the monsters will vanish.

I fight and people gather around me, standing idly by and watching me fight. They wait for me to fall. I won't fall, I can't fall, I'm built to fight, it's what I do. I cut and slash, spin and leap, feint and thrust, dance my dance, and slay my attackers.

So many of them and they come from all directions and still I fight, always I fight. Finally, there are no more, and I stand on a hill of the monsters and tower over my onlookers. They turn and flee, hating me

and spitting on me and I stand on the mountain of death and wait. The man in white screams in fury and changes into a towering monstrosity, fifty meters, a hundred meters high.

The new monster runs at me and the ground shakes beneath my feet as he runs. Long glittering talons, sweat and spittle flying, he charges screaming at me and as he reaches me, I strike. My knife/swords slide off his talons, harmless, and he snatches me into the air, crushing me. My back arches in screaming agony as his talons slice through me to the bone, shredding my skin and flesh.

The monster flings its arms back and forth, waving me in the air like a doll as he screams and howls in triumph at me. My body is dying, crushed in the razor-sharp talons. I bring the knife/swords down, plunging them into his wrist. He screams in pain and fury and flings me into the air. My body is twisted and broken, my skin and flesh fall from me. I reach the top of my flight and pause, and then I fall, fall, fall.

The monster grins at me, opens its mouth and screams its triumph. I bring my outstretched arms together, the knife/swords slice together like scissors, and I smash into the ground at his feet. The landing knocks the air from me, and I lie there gasping for air and dying, gazing at the glittering stars above me. The towering monstrous body is now headless and falls to the ground like a giant broken tree, with a crash that shakes the earth like the crack of doom.

Slime and filth run from the gaping hole where the monster's head had been. I try to move, to drag myself away from the filth that runs from the headless body.

I can't move. My body is sliced and torn, my skin and flesh ripped and shredded. A face appears before me, hovering in the air above me. Jane. She smiles at me and says she loves me. I don't know what she means. I wasn't made to be loved. I was made to fight.

Her face disappears and another takes her place. Colonel Lewis. He says he cares for me. I don't know what he means. I wasn't made to be cared for either. I was built to fight and die, fight to die, it's what I'm for,

it's what I do, fight to die. I've fought and now it's time to die. I close my eyes and welcome the dark.

I wake sweating and trembling. The nightmare was bizarre. Vivid. I rarely dream and when I do, it's vague and shadowy. That was, well, different. Where am I?

The room is cold and only a dim overhead light lights the dark room. Water drips slowly in great drops from the roof and the room spins when I move. I'm cold and covered by only a thin blanket. My combat suit and weapon are gone. I wonder where Jane is. I just saw her, I'm sure of it.

I'm confused, fuzzy, and my head pounds with yet another savage headache. I slowly sit upright and my head spins, the room whirling around me, and I lie down. My mouth is dry and tastes funny.

I lean from the bed, dip my fingers in a puddle of dirty water and suck them dry. It's a little better. I try sitting up again and finally manage it without the world going into an endless spin.

I slowly look around the dark room, worried that it's going to start spinning again. My bunk rests against the wall and the floor and walls are made of rough-cut rock. The rock roof drips with moisture and there are thick, heavy bars set in the rock to form the door. My head still pounding in pain, I drag myself to my feet and examine the bars before I try to peer out through them.

I can see nothing except more barred cells and dim lights in the roof. "Hello!" I yell and get no reply except an echo. I try Thedra and get no response from her.

The floor is cold on my bare feet, and I go back to the bunk. I sit down on the bunk and wrap the thin blanket around me, trying to keep warm. I wonder about the dream. It wasn't normal, at least for me. Maybe it was something in whatever was sprayed in my face.

I sit on the bunk and wait. Every now and then, I dip my fingers in the puddle of dirty water and suck them dry to quench my thirst. It's a long time before I hear the noise of someone approaching and two guards appear at the bars. One of them throws me a hospital gown.

"Put it on," he orders.

I drop the blanket and pull the hospital gown on. The other guard throws a collar to me.

"Put it around your neck. I want to hear it click, and then back up to the bars," he orders.

I pick up the silver collar. It's solid and hinged at one point, with a lock where it opens. I put it on, and it makes a loud click as it locks. I back up to the bars and they do something to check it or lock it.

"If you make any threatening moves or try to escape, the collar will explode. Understand?" says one of the guards.

"Yes," I reply, shrugging at the basic, primitive control at best.

They open the cell door and back away from me.

"Out. That way," he orders, pointing down the corridor.

I walk down the corridor and the guards follow me. We walk past many cells, all of them empty, and finally come to a set of stairs. I climb the stairs until I step through a door into a clean, white room.

"Keep going. Out the door and follow the corridor to the end, turn right," orders one of the guards.

I do as he says and follow the corridor to another door. The door slides open as I approach, and I continue inside while the guards remain outside as the door slides closed.

A man in a long white coat stands behind a desk facing an old-fashioned log heater. He pokes the logs with a steel bar, making sparks leap about as he pokes it. I look around the room. There's carpet on the floor, pictures on the walls and a bookcase with many books. Computer screens line his desk.

"Welcome home, Jaina. Have a seat," he says with his back to me. I sit in the only chair on my side of his desk and wait until he finally turns around. It's the man at the lift with the spray. He's aging, with grey hair at the temples.

"Sorry about the gown and the drugs. I hope the nightmares weren't too bad, but it's the only drug guaranteed to knock you out," he explains.

I shrug. "Who are you and why am I here?" At least I know what caused the nightmare.

"I am Doctor Charles McTien, and I'm one of your original creators. Why you're here is because I told you to come here. Surely you remember the voice that helped you after your mishap with the TND?" he replies with an unpleasant smile.

I don't like the smile very much, but yes, his voice does sound like the voice in my head all those days ago. "You asked me to come here, and yes, your voice does sound familiar, so why the unfriendly welcome?" I ask.

"Well, the Hastati series is known for being quite literal-minded. You do know you're one of the Hastati series, don't you? Perhaps not, you were never fully activated. Never mind. Your control protocols might have caused me some unpleasantness. So, I apologise for the unfriendly welcome, but I had to make sure you were unable to commit any acts of hostility against me. Thus, the collar and the rather unpleasant drug," explains McTien.

I'm confused. "What do you mean, never activated? I've been patrolling for over twelve months," I reply.

"Ah yes, well, that's just one of your roles. The Hastati series was a limited run of HKs with some very special skills and instructions added. There were only five of you ever made, and none of you were fully activated. You were considered far too dangerous," McTien explains.

I just love the way I'm an item. Designed, manufactured, catalogued, and filed under *Use only when threatened*. I'm beginning to get more than a little annoyed about the whole thing.

“What special skills?” I ask warily.

McTien opens a case on his desk. Lying inside is a glowing blue sword, which seems to glow from the inside. The sword is just under a meter long and very slightly curved. The blade is no more than an inch wide. The short handle is oval shaped to match the sword direction.

“This sword,” explains McTien, “is ancient. No one knows where it came from, but it’s unbelievably strong. Personally, I think it’s sharp enough to cut air. As for your extra skills, well, along with some added weapon skills, infiltration and assassination techniques, the Hastati series were taught the Gorkn language, both written and spoken. You were to be used in the event the Gorkn turned hostile, and along with the Gorkn, you were to terminate anyone involved in the P3D projects, and that would have included me,” McTien explains.

I sit staring at him. This guy is nuts. It’s a sword and it’s very pretty, but personally, I prefer a nice big weapon, making nice big holes in things instead.

“Okay, so there’s a pretty sword and I can speak and read Gorkn. So what?” I reply.

“We, well, more precisely my benefactors, were in touch with the Gorkn for some time before they lost contact. It’s a carefully kept secret that there’s a refugee fleet headed to Earth, and it’s due to arrive in about two months. The fleet was originally headed here as a refugee destination, but since ‘we’ humans are already here, the fleet will instead head about ten light years further out in the galaxy, to another habitable planet,” McTien explains.

That’s new. Well, not really. One of the many conspiracy theories talked about a refugee fleet.

“Now, my benefactors have no wish to be part of a refugee fleet, which is about the only option left to the human-race now, since the annoying mutant incident has escalated with the breeders. Instead, we intend to acquire a Gorkn warship and head for another inhabited planet in almost the opposite direction and set ourselves up there. With the gems and

precious metals, we can take from earth we should be extremely wealthy there. Your job is to get the Gorkn warship for us."

I sit there staring at him. He really is nuts. "There is no Gorkn ship. You blew it up, remember," I remind him.

"Yes, the refugee ship was blown up. Regrettable, but there you go. For several reasons, we had to force the issue and get a HK to come here, a Hastati version is a bonus. However, blowing up the ship was still a sound solution to the inconvenient mutant problem. But there is another ship in stationary orbit and hidden on the far side of the moon. That's the one you're going to get," McTien explains.

"Let me get this right. You want me to get you a Gorkn ship, so you and your friends can just leave and live a life of luxury somewhere?" I ask.

"Yes, plain and simple," says McTien, nodding and smiling the horrible smile.

"And the rest of the human race?" I ask.

"Well, they can leave on the refugee fleet, always assuming there's room and they're still alive," McTien casually replies.

"And where does the sword come into all this?" I ask.

"Ah! Yes, the sword. It's what you will have to use to get on board the Gorkn ship. The automatic security system will activate if you're carrying a weapon. Even you won't get on board and past the security system carrying a weapon. Well, actually, you'll get on board, you just won't survive for very long."

I sit and look at him. No way. "Sorry, but I'm going to have to decline. I'm not going to murder a ship's crew just for you and your friends," I tell him.

McTien sits and studies me, before he walks around the table to me.

"I wouldn't worry too much about the crew if I was you. And I could just reprogram you, but I'd rather not have to bother with that."

“How? I know brainwashing doesn’t work. It’s in my programming to know that, and it would take you too long anyway,” I retort.

“Not with you it won’t,” McTien grins. “Shame, really. I quite like the way you turned out. You see, all I have to do is kill your brain and keep your body alive. When your brain heals itself, it will be all nice and fresh and new and just begging for a new program to be inserted.”

McTien walks behind me and runs his hand down my face. “In fact, I might even make you, my lover. How does that sound?”

I don’t know how it sounds, and I have only a vague idea of what he means. I remain silent.

“Anyway, it’s your choice but, be quick. You can do it as Jaina, or you can do it as someone I make. Either way. it’s going to happen,” announces McTien, returning to his chair.

I’m horrified. He’s going to kill me and then reprogram me to kill humans. Well, Gorkn, but they’re humans too. The protocols are too widely defined and include anything non-threatening and the Gorkn haven’t been aggressive, so therefore they’re humans. The first protocol is buzzing around in my head like an angry bee. I need to get out of here. I need to get this neckpiece off.

First things first. Secure the area and then attack. I can’t lie, but I can avoid the truth. My primary protocol is going nuts and all I want to do is leap over the desk and throttle him. Except that will get me killed and I will fail my mission. Protect the race, buzzes the first protocol.

“Okay,” I announce slowly. “I think the protocols will let me do what you want. After you get the ship, what happens to me?” I ask.

“You go free. You can go back to killing your mutants. The ship is all we want,” explains McTien.

I don’t believe him for a second. While I haven’t learnt to lie, I have learnt to avoid telling the truth. He will either explode the neckpiece or reprogram me. I think I prefer the exploding neckpiece to the reprogramming.

“How do I get there?” I ask.

“First, do you agree to get the ship and return it here?”

I pause. “Yes, I’ll do that,” I reply.

“Good, because I know you can’t lie, none of you can. One of my better ideas, I think,” says McTien, with a self-satisfied smile. “Now, as for getting there, any of the JatBees will get you on board.”

“My suit?” I ask, standing.

“With the sword, and I’ll expect you back here in five days,” McTien says, waving his hand at his desk.

I take the suit from where he indicates, drop the gown and pull the suit on. He watches me as I dress, and for some reason, I turn to face away from him.

I zip the suit up and turn to pick up the sword. McTien puts his hand on mine and stops me.

“Oh, and Jaina, just in case you think you can try anything clever,” McTien says, indicating a screen on the wall. I look up at it.

Jane and General Alexa are sitting on a bench in one of the cells. My heart jumps and I suddenly feel cold and savage inside.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be back,” I say quietly. I don’t dare look at him in case I swing the sword. I turn to the door and pause with my hand on it, ready to open it.

“What about the neckpiece? Won’t the Gorkn detect the explosive?” I ask.

McTien comes around the desk and walks toward me, smiling. He reaches out and touches the neckpiece. “You look quite attractive in that. Perhaps a collar will be in order when you get back, but yes, most probably,” he replies. “You’ll just have to cope with it, otherwise it’s goodbye to Doctor Mathews and General Peternon.”

I swing the sword. “You know, you’re quite right about how sharp this sword is,” I announce as I walk to the mirror on the wall and examine myself in it. The body behind me falls to the floor and the head rolls under the table. I glance at the head. There’s a surprised look on its face.

I turn back to the mirror and lift the tip of the sword to the collar. With a flick of my wrist, I slice up through the sword. The sword goes through the collar and pain sears my face as I slice my chin, teeth and lips in half.

The collar explodes halfway to the ground, and I clamp my hand over my chin and mouth. The door flies open, and the two guards come through, raising their weapons.

“Far too late,” I think to myself. “Should have had them at shoulder-ready before they opened the door.” I kick-somersault over the chair and swing the sword. Two more bodies fall to the floor.

I close the door and sit in his chair. While I wait for my mouth to stop bleeding, I look through the terminals and papers on his desk.

I briefly wonder about the control protocols. I’ve killed a human. Three humans. My protocols should have overridden that. The human race is under the threat of extinction. The destruction of the Gorkn ship has accelerated the threat, and the dead doctor McTien was part of that. Therefore, he and anyone associated with him is a threat to the race.

The protocols bubble calmly across my mind as I sit in his chair and wait. I wait and read, looking through the terminals and finding a lot of stuff about my modifications. I start to read it and then change my mind.

I’m me, I’ve been designed and made, and I’ve had a whole other life stolen from me, but now I’m me. I’m Jaina. Age: well, I don’t know. But old enough I decide, even though I’m not quite sure what I’m old enough for. My skills are weaponry, tactics, warfare, and apparently infiltration and assassination. I don’t like the sound of the last one, so I cross that off the list. My likes are food, fashion, and music. Appearance, well I like me, I’m just not sure about my eyes. Hair colour, none, no hair. I run my

hand over my head and feel about an inch of hair there. At least it's growing back.

I touch my chin and mouth. I've stopped bleeding. I stand up and walk to the door. It's time to find Doctor Mathews and General Peternon.

I walk out the door and down the corridor to the cells. I search the corridors. No one. I search the rooms, the operating tables, rooms that contain chairs with straps and strange helmet devices and laboratories. I even search the test equipment and sealed concrete rooms. No hostages and no-one else in the complex, none. And just to be certain, I count them twice.

I have no idea who the mad doctor Charles McTien's colleagues are and no idea where Jane and General Alexa are. The cell looked like the one's downstairs, but there's no one else in the complex.

I find my weapon by the elevator, collect it, and check it. I feel a lot more comfortable with it. The sword is pretty, and it fits perfectly on my back. Its length is perfect, starting just under my shoulder blade and finishing at the opposite hip. It will certainly be easy to conceal, whether it is useful is a different matter.

I take the elevator to the surface, calling Thedra as I go up. I want to get out of here and I want to check on a few things.

"Thedra!" I call.

"Yes, Jaina, I'm here," Thedra finally replies.

"I'm ready for the flight now," I tell her.

"It'll be about fifteen minutes."

"I'll wait in the building," I tell her.

I wander around the inside of the building and wait. There's nothing interesting and no clue as to where to go next, just dirt and dust.

"Thedra, do you know anything about another starship on the far side of the moon?" I ask.

“I have nothing on record,” Thedra replies.

“Use the access codes from the field computer and make a copy of everything and anything you can find anywhere,” I tell her. “Oh, and make sure you include music and movies,” I add.

“Sorry? Music and movies?” Thedra exclaims.

“Yeah, I like old movies, and I haven’t decided on the music, so copy everything,” I tell her.

“I’m not a jukebox, you know,” she replies.

“Well, you are now. You’re my personal music player.” I laugh.

The JatBee lands in whirling snow, blown by the gusting wind. Twenty minutes later, I’m back in Colonel Lewis’s admin building and waiting to see him. He’s not having a good time.

While I listen to the raised voices coming from his office, I wipe the blood from my face and suit with a towel. I impatiently sit and wait a good five minutes, then get up and walk into his office, closing and locking the door behind me. I don’t feel in the mood to wait.

As I enter, Colonel Lewis turns and sees me. “Not now, Jaina,” he exclaims.

There are now two screens on the wall to the side of his desk. One screen shows the twelve dome commanders. The other screen shows a group of twenty people, all yelling at the dome commanders and telling the commanders that they’re in charge, they are the World Leaders, and the dome commanders will do as they say.

I ask Thedra to kill the sound feed from the second group and to leave the sound feed from the dome commanders on. The room goes quiet as the mouths of the WL continue to open and close the like goldfish in a bowl that I’d seen in a movie.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I’m Jaina and there’s an alien fleet headed this way and it’s time to shut up,” I tell them. I wait as the voices of the dome commanders slowly become silent. “I’m the last of the Hunter/Killers

and I've just found out a few things, including the fact that a refugee star fleet is headed this way, and there is a Gorkn warship parked on the other side of the moon," I announce to the monitor and wait for a reply.

Finally, a five-star General speaks. "We're listening," he announces. "I'm General Petrov."

"Well, General Petrov. A group of unknown persons has designs on a Gorkn warship and would like me to get it for them so they can leave for another planet and live a life of luxury," I announce. I continue to explain what doctor McTien told me and what happened afterwards. When I finish, I wait for a reply.

Finally, General Petrov asks, "Are you a danger to anyone at the present time, young lady?"

"Only to those responsible for the destruction of the Gorkn ship and the resulting increase in the threat to the race." I reply. "Oh, and mutants in general," I add.

General Petrov smiles at that bit. "In that case, what do you suggest to ensure our survival? Because quite frankly, the domes are only designed to support a million people each, but there's nearly two billion people still alive at this moment. How do we protect that many until the Earth's surface temperature returns to normal? And we still have the mutants to deal with. We've already had reports that they're moving about. The cold seems to have affected them only briefly."

That's interesting. The cold isn't affecting them. First, the breeders, and now they're becoming resistant to the cold weather. It just gets better and better.

I reply slowly but thinking fast. "I suggest we contact the Gorkn warship, explain what happened to the main refugee ship, and beg for evacuation with the refugee fleet. I also suggest you and the dome commanders assume command of the population, instigate martial law on a world-wide basis and tell the WL to sit in their safe haven and wait and pray that the incoming refugee fleet don't get too annoyed that we blew up one of their refugee starships."

General Petrov is silent for a moment. “And if we don’t get rescued by the refugee fleet?” he asks.

“Well, I guess we fight the mutants for our planet,” I reply with a shrug.

The voices rise and arguments break out from the little squares on the monitor screen. I sit back in the chair and wait. Colonel Lewis asks me if I’d like a drink. I take a bottle of water while he opens a beer and sits back with his feet on his desk.

“Looks like this will go on for a while,” he announces, waving his beer at the computer screen.

“It does indeed,” I reply.

“You don’t drink alcohol, Jaina?”

“No. I mistakenly thought vodka was water once,” I explain, reciting my story. Colonel Lewis laughs at the end of my story, which catches the attention of the arguing group, and they fall silent.

General Petrov asks what’s so amusing at a time like this and Colonel Lewis recites my story for him. At the end of the story, everyone is smiling and more than a few are laughing. The way Colonel Lewis tells the story is much funnier than my version.

“Jaina, we’re going with your suggestion. As the most senior officer, I’m assuming command and overall responsibility. We need to contact the Gorkn warship, and I’m sending you to do it. I’m getting the outgoing communications with the WL bunker shut down, and I’m ordering search teams to all the secure research labs and facilities to locate Doctor Mathews and General Peternon,” announces Colonel Lewis.

“I won’t fight the Gorkn,” I tell him. “They’ve done nothing to harm us,” I explain.

“No, I just think you’re the best person to contact the warship. Your first protocol is to protect the human race, and your motivation is greater than anyone’s, and I’m sorry to say it, but if worse comes to worst, you’re more likely to survive than anyone else. There is a modified JatBee being made ready for you in Florida. I know you have access to

flight transport, so you can make your own way there," explains General Petrov. "Oh, and one more thing. Any chance we can have access to Thedra's satellite network? She's refusing to give us access on the basis that she only takes orders from you."

"I'll ask her nicely for you," I reply with a faint smile.

The Gorkn Warship.

I leave the colonel and the dome commanders and head for the JatBee and Florida. Ninety minutes later, after taking off from the dome and with Thedra flying the JatBee, I land at the Florida space centre.

There are two Colonels waiting for me and we hurtle off in a little jeep that slips and slides on the snow that covers the roads. I have to say the sight of the old launch vehicles on display and covered in snow is awesome. It's incredible how big they are.

I follow the two Colonels into a large meeting room. The room is crowded and chaos reigns, with officers and technicians all talking, yelling, and arguing at once. I follow the Colonels to the front of the room, and they yell and bang on the podium for quiet. Eventually the room falls silent.

As the Colonels introduce me to the group, more chaos erupts. People are talking over people and arguing about letting someone untrained in space flight, and a HK at that, take their space-modified JatBee. The shouting starts again, and I wander off and sit on a chair in the corner while they yell at each other.

I'm bored. I just want to get this over and done with. I wonder if I can get a meal somewhere. I leave the room and the chaos in search of something to eat. After asking several people I meet as I wander the corridors for directions, I eventually find a mess hall in another building.

Now, this is more like it. It smells reaaallllly good in here and the food looks far more interesting than it was at the last base and the menu selection is enormous.

I stand at the counter and point at what I want. The woman behind the counter slowly fills the plate to overflowing. I take the plate from her with a huge smile. I'm almost drooling as I find a table on my own to enjoy it.

It's awesome. OMG, it's amazing. Now, this is what I expected at the base. Peas, onions, and sautéed potatoes fight the steak with the mouth-watering sauce to be first in my mouth. I have never experienced food so wonderful and never imagined it could taste so good.

I'm halfway through my meal and busy reading the dessert menu, trying to decide what to get next, when a young woman sits down opposite me with a plate full of green leafy stuff.

"Hi," she says, "I'm Cee."

"Hi," I reply absently. I'm busy with the dessert menu, please go away. "I'm Jaina," I add.

"You're the HK who's taking the JatBee up, yeah?" Cee asks. She's quite tall, taller than I am, tanned and fit, with short, dark hair and dark smiling eyes.

"Yeah, I'm the one," I reply. Hmmm, chocolate or vanilla? I'm still trying to figure out what to have for desert and I'm not really concentrating on her.

"I was supposed to be on the next space flight, but it was cancelled when they announced the Gorkn ship was going to be destroyed. It was my first flight and now I guess I'll never go," Cee explains.

She sounds quite sad. Reluctantly, I force myself to stop looking at the menu and concentrate on her.

"I'm sure there'll be another one," I tell her.

“Not likely. Too many flight commanders and not enough flights,” shrugs Cee.

“But you can fly the JatBee and everything?” I ask.

“Yeah, fully qualified, and ready to go. It’s all been a bit of a waste of time now,” Cee says sadly.

“Well, is the JatBee ready to go?” I ask, suddenly interested in her.

“Yep, all prepped and ready to roll.”

I’ve finished my meal and dessert is beckoning. “Look, don’t go anywhere. I’ll be right back. Just getting dessert,” I tell her.

I head back to the counter and get bananas and ice cream, and apple pie, and strawberries, and the staff behind the counter tell me to leave. I head back to my table in a bit of a sulk. There’s still a lot more there to try. Maybe I can go back for seconds.

I sit at the table with my overflowing bowl of goodness and Cee’s eyes nearly pop out of her head. “How do you eat all that and stay slim?” Cee exclaims.

“I do a lot of running,” I reply, taking a mouthful of almost everything. OMG, bananas, and ice cream. I’ve just died and gone to heaven. No, I haven’t, I’ve just tasted the strawberries, now I have. Cee watches me eat with widening eyes.

“Anyone would think you’ve never eaten before,” exclaims Cee.

“I’ve never eaten anything like this before,” I tell her with my mouth full of banana.

“Seriously? What do you normally eat?”

“Just meat and carbs,” I reply, sucking ice cream from the spoon.

“What! Is that it?” Cee exclaims.

“Yeah, it’s all we need to survive and fight,” I reply.

Oh, dear God. Apple pie, where have you been all my life?

"Is that all you do?"

"Yep, eat, fight and die, ten days on and two days off," I reply. "That's my life," I add.

"What about boyfriends and dating and socialising and holidays?" Cee asks.

I look at her, slightly puzzled. "No, none of that. I have a computer that I use to browse the Net. Mainly the fashion and music sites, and I have my own blog too. Why would I need anything more? I'm only here to kill mutants," I tell her, still a bit puzzled.

Cee looks stunned and horrified at the same time, but I'm too interested in my heaven in a bowl, which is now finished. I contemplate seconds and look over at the counter. The staff behind the counter glare back at me as if daring me to go up there. Maybe not. I'd better go and see if my flight is ready.

"Can you take me back to the briefing room?" I ask.

"Sure," shrugs Cee. "I don't have anything better to do."

Cee leads the way back to the building with the meeting room. Along the way, she tells me about her life. She has two Doctorates, in astronomy and physics. She tells me her father is a programmer and named her Cee as a joke on an old programming language. I don't understand the joke, but she thinks it's funny.

"Sorry, I don't get it. The joke," I explain.

"Oh, my surname is Sharp. Cee Sharp you see," explains Cee.

I look at her, blink and focus my attention on the corridor. I still don't get it. I follow Cee in silence.

We arrive at the briefing room and the arguments and yelling are still in full swing. In fact, I think the number of people in there has might have gone up.

"Hmmm. Want to show me the JatBee, Cee?" I ask, looking at the crowded room.

"Yeah, I'd love to," she replies.

We head back the way we came, and Cee commandeers a jeep. It seems only able to drive at two speeds, stopped and OMG! Over the howling electric motor of the jeep, I ask her to stop at my JatBee.

I climb into it and collect my gear. Backpack, ration packs, trauma pack, combat knife and my weapon. Just as I'm about to leave, I catch sight of the eighty-centimetre-long box with the sword in it. I grimace. Should I? Maybe?

I drop the backpack and put my weapon down. I reluctantly open the box. The sword hides in its scabbard. I reach out and touch the hilt. There's something about it. I pick up the sword and partly draw it.

The glow is still there, very faint. I push the sword home and stand up, strapping it to my back with the hilt at my right shoulder and the tip at my left hip. It's surprisingly short for a sword. As I make the sword secure, I notice the strap and the scabbard. It's not original. At some point, someone has made the strap and scabbard for the sword.

I collect my pack and weapon and join Cee in the jeep for another supersonic drive across the tarmac to a waiting JatBee. I notice this JatBee is a little different from mine. It's slightly larger for a start.

A couple of guards are on duty by the JatBee entrance, and they salute Cee as she leads me through the open airlock door, explaining and pointing out items on it.

"It's very similar to a standard JatBee," explains Cee. "It has all the characteristics of its little cousin. It has all the basics, artificial gravity, inertia dampeners, vertical flight and hypersonic flight. The main differences are a sealed cabin with airlocks, a significantly higher top speed, and a navigation system that's suitable for space flight. And of course, everything is self-contained. We have food, water, a kitchenette. Our EVA suits are in here." Cee opens a compartment door, to reveal the enclosed helmets and big bulky EVA suits arranged in neat rows. "The suits are basically one size fits all these days. They're adjustable, have propulsion units on them, air for twelve hours, and a micro fusion

generator for power," explains Cee, showing me the suit controls, locks, and adjustments.

Cee leads me forward to the cockpit and tells me it's a flight deck, not a cockpit. Sorry, my mistake. The flight deck has two seats facing a much bigger control console than my JatBee, and a large-view screen through which I can see the empty snow-covered runways.

Throttles, flight controls, nav system, power management, most of the controls look reasonably familiar. Another two seats at the back of the flight deck are facing aft and they have another set of consoles in front of them. Engineering and navigation, explains Cee. The officers at those positions are responsible for navigating the JatBee and making sure everything is working the way it's supposed to.

"To be honest, they're redundant positions because everything can be run from the main console, but we have to have them manned for safety reasons," shrugs Cee.

I sit down in the left-hand seat while Cee continues explaining things to me. This does this and this does that. I nod and murmur at her, following her explanations.

"Cee, can you fly this in space? And can you get to the Gorkn ship on the far side of the moon?" I ask, interrupting her mid explanation about some sort of procedure for double-checking flight co-ordinates with a ground station.

"Yeah, easy, but I'm never going to get there," she sighs.

I've been busy examining the flight chairs during her long-winded explanations. "What are these for?" I ask, indicating the straps on them.

"They're in case we lose artificial gravity and go weightless. The straps on the arms and legs of the chair will hold us down, to stop us from moving about and maybe hitting something we shouldn't," explains Cee.

"Oh, good. Hold still for a second," I say. I reach over and secure her hands and legs to the chair.

"Like that, yeah?" I ask, checking the straps are tight.

“Yeah, just like that, except you’ve secured the straps the wrong way. I can’t undo them, and I’m supposed to be able to,” explains Cee, wriggling in the straps.

“Oh, really? I never would have imagined,” I reply, grinning.

I turn back to the console. Hatch closed and power on. Engine ignition and power management on. Navigation and radar systems coming online. Check the tracking system and external monitors for obstacles.

Brakes off and throttles forward. The JatBee slowly starts moving. In the monitor screens, I can see the guards running after us and waving at us to stop.

“What are you doing?” Cee yells at me, tugging on the restraining straps.

“Ever been kidnapped?” I grin. I turn the JatBee onto the runway and push the throttles all the way to their stops.

I have to say, it’s fast, and we are way over rotate speed before I manage to pull back on the flight controls and we blast into the sky. Oh dear, I’ve forgotten to turn on the radio. Oh well, I’ll do that later.

Cee is yelling at me about flight trajectories, paths, and clearance, and the JatBee just keeps tearing into the sky. The sky changes colour from blue to purple to black and the stars come out, millions and millions and millions of them.

The engine noise changes pitch, becoming deeper and quieter, and still, we tear up into the black, star-filled sky. In the rear monitor, the Earth becomes a dirty cloud-covered orb.

“Want to fly now?” I ask.

“Probably a good idea,” Cee snaps. “At this rate we’re going to hit Saturn, not the moon.”

I lean over and undo the straps that restrain her.

“That is NOT how you’re supposed to leave Earth orbit,” Cee scolds, “and we are way off course.”

“So, sue me. I don’t have forever to wait for someone to make a decision,” I shrug.

Cee punches buttons on the nav computer and the JatBee changes course. She pulls her headset on and starts calling flight base.

“Would you like me to turn comms on?” I ask. Cee glares at me. I smile to myself, pull on my headset and turn comm unit on.

“This is Jaina1798 in route to the Gorkn ship with Flight Commander Cee as co-pilot,” I announce into the throat mic.

“Jaina1798, return to base immediately. You are not authorised to proceed with this mission,” replies an angry voice.

“Roger that, Control. I’ll see you in five days,” I reply, switching comm unit off.

“I’m going to get court-martialled,” wails Cee.

“Not if we do what we have to do,” I reply, gazing at the stars. “Just get me to the Gorkn ship.” The sky is amazing. So many stars.

“Jaina?” asks Thedra in my head.

“Yes Thedra,” I reply, getting a strange look from Cee. I get up and head to the back of the main cabin.

“I’m getting a lot of radio traffic and comms about your unauthorised take-off,” says Thedra.

“Just ignore it. You have all the MacJets under your control and nobody is coming anywhere near you. But let me know if anything is threatening you and I’ll make a call. Besides, you can always just call General Petrov and get them to back off and do their job and let us get on with ours,” I whisper into my hands. I don’t want Cee to know about Thedra. At least not yet.

The main cabin is big and there are even a couple of nice, roomy aft cabins for sleeping. Well, roomy for me. I sleep in a narrow bunk, so anything wider than a meter and longer than two, is big to me.

I check out the kitchenette and the surprising lack of food it contains. I stick my head into a tiny tech lab for a quick look at a lot of equipment I have no idea what to do with and check out the bulkhead door which separates the main cabin from the cargo area.

I peer through the view port in the bulkhead door to the cargo area, nothing interesting in there either. I wander around the cabin looking for the airlock and finally find it.

I go back to the flight deck. "Cee, how are we doing?" I ask.

"Good, now!" Cee snaps and glares. "We are now on course for the Gorkn ship and will be in orbit around the moon in thirteen hours."

"Cool. If you're not busy then, can you show me how the airlock works?" I ask.

I hear voices coming from the radio. "... confirm course correction, you are on track for target." Cee acknowledges.

"So, we're back on talking terms with the base too?" I ask.

"Flight control," Cee replies coldly, "are tracking us and confirming our flight trajectory as per standard procedure."

Well, I guess I'm not in the good books but as long as we get to the Gorkn I don't care.

As Cee shows me how to operate the airlock, I nod and take it all in. This light green, open the hatch, step in, close the hatch, wait for the green light on this side, red light on this side, blah, blah, blah. She could have just said green is go, and red is stop. I would have got it. I just wanted to double check. I quite like air and the way it goes in and out of me when I breathe.

"Jaina, I've been in contact with General Petrov," announces Thedra in my head, distracting me from some extra protocol check I'm supposed to do when I use the airlock. Personally, I know all I need, red and green.

"How did it go?" I ask, moving away from Cee and her continuing lecture on safety and the airlock.

“He’s most impressed with the way you get things done. It’s just that your methods are less than subtle,” explains Thedra.

“Well, we weren’t taught to be subtle. We were taught to kill stuff, quickly and efficiently,” I reply.

“I’ll pass on the message. I’m sure he’ll be amused,” says Thedra.

Cee has either given up on lecturing me about the airlock or actually finished her lecture and gone back to the cockpit. Sorry, flight deck.

While Cee flies the JatBee, I amuse myself checking my gear. Well, that took all of five minutes. Now what? I decide to play with the field computer and see what else it downloaded when I wasn’t looking.

It must obviously have been dull stuff because I doze off and only wake when Cee yells at me.

“Jaina, we’re in visual range!” she calls from the flight deck.

I head to the flight deck, take my seat and notice I’m in the co-pilot seat now. Through the flight screen in front of me, I can see a ship growing larger as we approach it. The ship is long, elongated, and flatter than it is high. It looks a bit like a slightly squashed sausage, which reminds me, I really need to try sausages when I get back. The ones in the mess hall wouldn’t fit on my plate.

Eight fins at the front of the ship protrude around it and there’s a similar set at the rear. Turrets and weapon ports line the hull in rows, while the bottom of the ship flattens out and appears to extrude from it. With no reference point, it’s hard to tell how big it is. Cee guides us to the ship, and I watch it in front of me as it changes shape and gets a whole lot larger in the view screen.

“Have we had any radio contact yet?” I ask.

“No, nothing is hailing us,” replies Cee.

I put the headset on and change radio channels. “Jaina hailing Gorkn warship,” I call in Gorkn. As we approach, I keep hailing the ship on

different channels. I know the Gorkn general hailing frequencies, and I don't get anything back.

Now that we're alongside and up close to the Gorkn ship, I can really see how big the ship is. It's easily two kilometres long, and it dwarfs the JatBee. We are a rowboat beside an aircraft carrier and Cee takes us around and behind the ship, where we can see exhaust ports and rear weapon pods.

As we approach the rear of the ship, the bottom of the ship starts to open where it flattens out, and a monstrously huge hangar door swings out and up, coming to rest against the belly of the ship.

"Head in, Cee," I tell her.

"We need to report to flight control first," says Cee.

I turn to look at her. "Head in, Cee," I order.

Cee looks at me for a long time before she finally turns back to her controls and guides us to the open hangar door.

The hangar door is easily big enough to take the JatBee stacked four high and at least twenty wide. As the JatBee enters the hangar, there is a shimmering effect around the flight screen.

Lined up along the walls, four rows deep and waiting to fly, are Gorkn versions of the JatBee along with sleek one and two-man fighters. Flashing lights on the floor show us where to go, and Cee slowly follows them and brings the JatBee to a stop at the end of the lights.

About twenty meters from the deck of the hangar, a fenced walkway runs the entire perimeter of the hangar area. Stairs and equipment lifts, lead from the deck to the walkway. I can see hatches and airlocks at intervals along the walkway, and no welcoming committee.

While Cee lands the JatBee on the deck and powers down the systems, I peer out the view screen and check the scanners, changing settings and looking for anyone.

"This is where I get off. Thanks for the lift, Cee."

“What do you want me do?” Cee asks.

“Take off and circle the moon. If you don’t hear from me in 24 hours, head back home. General Petrov will look after you,” I reply. “And sorry about the kidnapping.”

I get ready to leave, check my pack and check the sword. I haven’t even been aware of it, even though I’ve had it on all this time. I check my weapon and weapon load and check that the extra ammunition blocks are in my trouser pouches.

Since we’ve had no response from our hails and there’s no-one waiting for us, I’m taking my chances and bringing my weapon anyway, despite what Doctor McTein said about the security system.

Cee is looking a bit lost as I step into the airlock. “Take care and thanks. At least I got into space AND visited an alien spaceship. I only wish the Gorkn had shared their space technology with us, this is amazing!” Cee exclaims.

I smile at her and mentally shrug. It’s a ship. It’s not a threat and therefor nothing special. I cycle the airlock. The JatBee sensors says there is air out there and I don’t have to worry about wearing an EVA suit. I wait inside the airlock as it slowly goes through its routine. Red stop, green go, yeah, yeah, hurry it up.

Finally, after what seems like ages, the outer hatch opens with a slight hiss, and I step outside the JatBee.

The air smells musty and dry as the airlock hatch closes behind me. There’s no noise in the massive hangar, no sound at all. I walk warily towards the railings ahead of the JatBee. The sound of my boots on the deck seems quite loud in the total silence. There’s no one to meet me, the suit radio remains silent, and the ship feels deserted and empty.

“Jaina?” asks Cee on the radio.

“Yes, Cee,” I reply, turning to look at the JatBee, “you’re clear to leave.”

“Are you sure?” Cee asks. “I can just wait here in case you need me,” she adds.

"No, head out. Something's not right and I need you out of here in case we need to get a message to Earth," I order her.

"All right, if you're sure," Cee replies.

"I'm sure. Now head out," I order.

I watch as the JatBee lifts off vertically from the deck, slowly turns 180 degrees, and heads back out through the massive hangar door. There's a weird shimmering effect around the JatBee as it passes through the gaping hole of the hangar entrance and disappears into the empty space beyond.

With the JatBee and Cee safely away, I patrol up the steps to the first landing and through a hatch leading into the interior of the ship. The ship is silent, the air is dry and musty, and it's quiet, silent, and empty.

"Thedra?" I ask aloud. There's no reply on the radio or in my head, just the echo of my voice in the corridor.

I patrol along the corridor from the hatchway. More corridors and hatches lead off this one and disappear into the distance. I come to a junction in the corridors where there's a map of the deck on the wall. I trace my path on the map, looking for a way to the flight deck. I turn left and head to what looks like an elevator shaft on the map.

The ship is silent, noiseless, apart from a soft patter-patter-patter that suddenly comes and just as suddenly disappears. The sound of something running. I spin and drop, kneeling on the deck, searching for a target. There's nothing behind me, nothing in front of me, nothing on my scanner. I wait, silent and listening. The sound doesn't come again.

I try hailing the Gorkn on the radio again and get silence in return. I double-check the load on the weapon and start to patrol, weapon up and safety off. The ship is silent, but I was wrong about it being empty.

The silence, no replies on the radio calls, and the patter-patter sound are all combining to make me more than a little nervous. I patrol slowly down the corridor, scanning and listening for any sound, any movement. There's nothing but silence. I can see the elevator ahead now and I slowly

patrol my way toward it. More corridors branch off from this one and I check down each one for movement. There's nothing but empty corridors and silence.

The mutant comes hurtling silently from around the corridor in front of me, barrelling into me and knocking me over backwards. As I fall, I bring my legs up and kick hard as it hits me. Its momentum and my kick combine to throw it off balance and it lands down the corridor skidding and sliding, in complete silence. It doesn't grunt. It doesn't howl. There is just the faint sound of it breathing hard.

I leap up, landing on my feet, and spin around to meet it. In the sudden collision, I've dropped my weapon, and the mutant is up and charging for me and coming in fast. There's no time to retrieve my weapon and bring it to target. I raise my hand to my shoulder, draw and swing the sword in one swift movement, and step aside as the sword slices off the mutant's head. The mutant collapses on the ground, sliding a few metres from its momentum while the head rolls away up the corridor.

Mutants! On a Gorkn ship! How?

I double-check the scanner in the helmet. There are no red dots. The scanners have always had trouble in congested towns and cities, and I suppose it might not work that well in the metal confines of the ship.

I kneel beside the dead mutant and examine it, careful not to touch it or the body fluids. It is definitely a mutant. Different to the ones on Earth. It's bigger, for a start.

Well, mutants on board. I guess that explains the lack of a welcoming party or security detail along with the empty, silent ship. The mutants would have decimated the crew before the crew even realised what was going on.

I collect my weapon and return to patrol mode. My weapon up and ready. I work my way along the corridor to the elevator. Check and sweep, check and sweep.

At the elevator, I press the call button and wait for the doors to slide open. Nothing leaps out but before I step in.

All the buttons are in Gorkn, but it reads like English to me.
I press the button marked *Flight Deck*, just twenty decks above me. The elevator doors slide open, and I step out into another corridor, sweeping and checking for targets. No target, nothing moves. There's just more silence and dust.

I patrol my way carefully down the corridor, listening for the sound of anything moving. The stress and tension are killing me. Get on with it and jump me already. My scanner shows nothing, but I don't exactly trust it now, and still nothing leaps out at me.

Ahead I can see a hatch marked *Flight Deck*. I stop at the hatch and listen. I can't hear anything from inside it. I push the hatch open and step inside, securing and locking it behind me.

I work my way around the flight deck, sweeping and checking, looking for anything that wants to eat me, and securing the flight deck hatches as I go. With hatches secured and locked, I make one more sweep of the flight deck before I finally decide it's secure and I can safely turn my attention to the flight deck itself.

The flight deck is a huge, round area. Along one wall is a massive view screen that looks out to space. There are eight control positions arranged in two rows of four. Comprised of consoles with swivel chairs, they face the view screen.

Banks of equipment and monitors line the walls, along with more computer consoles and chairs. Lights flicker here and there. Computer displays show various status messages and readings. Scanner screens show objects outside the ship, including the trajectory plot of a green dot slowly getting further away.

There's nothing and no one on the flight deck, but at least I now have one known safe area.

"Cee, are you there?" I ask into the suit radio.

"Yes, Jaina," comes her reply.

"I'm on the flight deck. There's no-one here, and so far, I haven't found any of the crew, but I did find a mutant," I inform her.

"A mutant! Is it dead?" Cee exclaims.

"It is now," I reply. "Also, do the comms to Earth work here?" I ask.

"No comms here. We're on the blind side of the moon, which means the moon blocks the comm signals," Cee replies. "And what do you mean, it is now?"

"It was alive, now it's dead," I explain. "Will you have comms when you swing around the moon?" I ask.

"Not funny, and yes I'll have comms," Cee snaps.

Well, that explains why Thedra has stopped talking to me again.

"Okay, copy our findings to General Petrov when you swing around the other side. Tell him there's no crew, we've found mutants, and the ship appears intact and operational," I tell her.

"If the crew are missing or dead, what do we do now?" Cee asks.

"I don't know, but don't come back on board. I don't know if there are any more mutants around," I reply.

I sign off and wander around examining the systems. Flight management and navigation system, life support and communications console.

Right let's start with communications. Its computer driven and I pull up a menu. I select shipboard communications, broadcast, and ship wide. I open the channel, set record mode and broadcast.

"This is Jaina from planet Earth. I am currently on the flight deck. If there are any personnel on board, make yourself known immediately."

I set the message to repeat every minute for the next hour, while I look at the rest of the consoles.

An hour later, I've figured out most of the basics of the ship's flight controls. I'm going to have to be a bit careful of the sheer mass of the ship. It's not going to handle like a JatBee, but I do have a question for Cee when she swings back round the moon to this side, and I can talk to her again.

I've figured out the life support system and even found a way to deal with any mutants on board. There's an emergency decontamination system. It can depressurise the entire ship and open it up to space. Every hatch in the ship will open and stay open, until the decontamination system has completed its cycle. The only problem is, I don't have an EVA suit and I've grown rather fond of breathing, which makes the idea just a little difficult to implement.

The navigation system looks simple, even for me. I pull up a three-dimensional hologram chart of the stars and move my fingers through it. Move here and here, rotate, flip, zoom. I draw trajectories and course plots. Set speeds and waypoints. It's a bit like a standard 3D hologram computer display the computer techs are so fond off and always waving their hands in.

It's all very simple, really. I choose a destination and mark it on the chart, and any waypoints that I want to visit along the way. To orbit a planet, all I do is just draw a circle around it and the computer figures out the orbit parameters and fixes up the messy drawing.

I set up a course and planet orbit. The computer calculates everything and the trajectory and flight details appear on a screen. *Execute?* it asks. I hesitate for a moment, then press *Execute*. The message changes to *Error*.

Huh? I trace the command sequences and double-check what I've told the computer to do, and I find the error. Once all the flight trajectories are in the hologram display, the actual navigation commands are transferred to the flight control console.

I wander over to the flight control console, where I find a 2D version of what I want to do and a computer asking me for the navigation officer

confirmation. Okay, whatever.

I go in search of the navigation officer console and find another computer requesting me to manually calculate the course, headings, and acceleration settings. Righttttt, so there is supposed to be a navigation officer to cross-check the computer navigation. Well, that's nice, but I don't do that sort of math.

I go back to the flight control console and fiddle around with the computer menus. Ahah, found it. I can override the requirement for navigation confirmation and just let the computer guide the ship. Easy. I reach to touch the button, then stop. I've just thought of something.

I sit back and swivel in the chair to the 3D display. There's a nice 3D display with an easy-to-use interface, and it works everything out. I swivel to look at the navigation officer console. There's supposed to be a navigation officer to cross-check the computer. Why? I have no problem with the 3D screen or the computer figuring out what to do. It's all nice and simple for a simple girl like me, except for one minor issue. Why does it have to be double-checked?

I have to trust the computer to fly the ship, which now I don't. "If I can trust the computer, why do I need a navigation officer to double-check it?" I ask myself. Along with the weird mutants, it's another worry.

"Jaina?" asks Cee on the radio.

"Hey, you're back in range," I reply happily, "and I have a question," I add.

"Hang on. I've spoken to General Petrov and flight control. They aren't too happy about your news, but they want to know if you can de-contaminate the ship and move it into Earth orbit," asks Cee.

"Did they say why they want it in Earth orbit?" I frown.

"No," replies Cee.

Hmmm, I'm not sure about handing over a serious piece of military hardware with the refugee fleet on its way. It's not that I don't trust the

General. Well, yes, it is actually. Then again, maybe he just wants to use it as a goodwill gesture.

"Cee, I have a question. There's a set of controls here labelled FTL drive. Any idea what it means?" I ask.

"Yes!" exclaims Cee. "It means don't touch that button. It stands for Faster Than Light, and without a pre-plotted course, you could end up anywhere," she explains.

"Probably not a good idea to push it, then," I reply. Lucky, I asked, I was thinking of just pushing it and seeing what happened.

"Do you want me to come on board to move the ship, Jaina?" asks Cee.

I can imagine her face. She must be dying to get on board here and play with this thing. I look around at all the controls. I'll crash this thing for sure or end up in some random place without a name if I play with it. Somehow, I'm going to have to get her up here.

"Yes, come back to the hangar and I'll come and get you. Don't leave the JatBee until I get there. Okay?" I ask.

"Roger that, I'll be right there," Cee replies excitedly.

I collect my weapon and double-double-check it. I'll leave the pack here, get Cee, and get back here. I only encountered the one mutant on the way up and maybe they've all killed themselves off. I can only hope.

I double-check my weapon again, before I head for the hatch and listen for anything outside. I can't hear anything waiting for me outside. I push the hatch open, step through and secure it behind me.

My weapon up and ready. Sweep and check, I patrol my way back down the corridor to the elevator. Every now and then, I hear the patter-patter sound and have to stop and check everywhere. There's no sign of the mutants, just the very faint patter-patter sound.

I step inside the elevator and wait as it drops twenty decks to the hangar level. The doors slide open, and I step out, checking everywhere,

swivelling backwards and forwards searching for a target and finding none.

The mutant body is gone. Well, that at least confirms that I'm not alone. I patrol down the corridor, helmet scanner on and no red dots. Patter-patter-patter. I drop to my knee and listen, swivelling backwards and forwards looking for a target.

There are no targets in the scanner display and nothing in sight. This is seriously driving me nuts. I continue my patrol down to the next corridor and towards the hangar. Nothing anywhere, and I'm really not having a good day. I can't understand why the mutants aren't out and coming for me. Since when did mutants just run about tracking their prey and not just eating it?

I finally reach the hangar where Cee has landed the JatBee. I check the scanner display for red dots and targets, but there is nothing anywhere.

"Stay in the JatBee until I call, Cee," I tell her on the radio.

"Sure," she replies.

I check the scanner again, still no red dots. Come on, where are you? I patrol slowly to the JatBee, my weapon up and sweeping and checking. No targets. I reach the JatBee door and back up to it until I touch the JatBee airlock hatch. Scan and sweep. I search for anything out of the ordinary in the hangar, movement, moving shadows, anything. Nothing moves in the silence.

"Cee, put your EVA suit on, and can you carry a spare suit for me?" I ask. "

Yes, but why do I need a suit? There's air out there," Cee asks, puzzled.

"Just humour me," I tell her, kneeling by the airlock, watching, and waiting. No red dots, no movement. Where are they? Where are the mutants.

"How much do you weigh?" asks Cee.

"What? 120 kilos. Why?" I exclaim.

“120 kilos? No way. You’re more like 60 or 65!” exclaims Cee.

“Nope, 120 kilos. HKs are way more dense than normal humans,” I reply.

“Are you serious? If I get the suit settings wrong, you won’t feel too good about it,” Cee says.

“I’m sure. Next time we find a set of scales, I’ll show you,” I reply.

I hear Cee on the radio. “All right, it’s set for 120 kilos. You better be right. I’m coming out,” announces Cee.

“Okay, it’s all clear,” I reply.

Still nothing. The tension will kill me at this rate. Maybe that’s what the mutants are counting on.

I hear the airlock hiss open and Cee behind me.

“Cee, I want you to lead. Head for the railing you saw me go to, and if I say drop, hit the deck like it’s your best friend. Okay?”

“Okay. Are we safe?” Cee asks.

I can hear the nervousness in her voice. I’m worried myself. I’ve never known mutants to do this and now I need to escort a civilian through a maze of tunnels with no clear field of fire and no way to know where the next target is. The scanner is still stubbornly refusing to do anything except display a blank screen completely devoid of anything. I’m definitely going to die of stress at this rate.

With Cee leading the way, I follow behind her just an arm’s reach away from her. I have my weapon up, patrolling and sweeping. If a mutant comes for us, I can get her on the ground and defend her, and the EVA suit should protect her from body fluid spray. Well, that’s my plan anyway.

We reach the railing and move carefully up the steps. As we near the hatch, I push her to the side and listen. Nothing. I open the hatch and check down the corridor. There’s a whole lot more nothing down there.

I signal her through and pull the hatch closed behind us. In the distance at the end of the corridor, I can see the map directions. There are four corridors between the map and us. We slowly move forward towards the first corridor intersection. Nothing. We pass that one and approach the next. Halfway there, I hear the patter-patter-patter sound again.

"Drop!" I yell into the radio.

Cee hits the deck, and I swivel backwards and forwards, up and down the corridor, looking for targets. At least Cee is quiet and doesn't question me. Nothing. There are no targets and nothing is moving.

I start to stand, and a movement catches my eye. There, a shadow moved! I drop and kneel, watching the shadow. Yes, the shadow in the corridor ahead is wrong. There shouldn't be a shadow there.

I kneel beside Cee and without moving the weapon from the shadow target, I check behind me. Nothing there. I can see the open hatch behind me. Open hatch? We closed it. Oh, bugger!

The helmet scanner is still stubbornly showing no red dots on it, nothing new there. Cee is lying pushed up against the wall and I kneel with my back to the wall, with Cee behind and beneath me.

I swivel the weapon up and down the corridor. Will the rounds penetrate the metal walls? Maybe. It's a warship. Maybe not. I don't know. I target the wall, aiming for the shadow behind it. Red target dot, squeeze the trigger.

The round hits the wall and ricochets, howling up the corridor. Well, that answers that question. I change target and fire at the opposite wall of the corridor. Red dot, fire, change target angle, red dot, fire. There's a scream of fury and a mutant comes raging around the corner. Red dot, fire.

I turn back down the corridor. Two mutants are coming for me. Target, fire, target, fire. I turn back. More mutants. Target, fire, target, fire. More behind me, fire, fire, fire.

I stand and move back, target, fire, turn, target, fire, fire, fire. More mutants are coming, getting too close, and are almost on me before I can target. They're silent as they run. No screams, no howls. The weapon is the only noise in the silent ship. Whump-whump-whump echoes up and down the corridor.

Cee is screaming into her helmet. Target, fire, turn, fire, fire, fire, fire. Turn, fire, step out of the way of the falling body, target, fire. Turn and fire. More targets from further up the corridor, target, fire, fire. More mutant bodies falling.

Silence, search for targets, no targets, no movement. I patrol up the corridor, nothing down either side corridor.

"Cee, come to me and be very careful not to touch the bodies or the fluids," I order.

Cee scrambles to her feet and stumbles over to me, stepping over the bodies. I check her suit. No marks and no fluid splash on it. I push her ahead of me towards the map and check the corridors at the map location. Nothing there.

I turn her to the left and we head for the elevator. There's no sound and no red dots on the scanner. I'm giving up on the scanner.

At the corridor intersection, I stop and check for movement. Nothing, and we move on with only three more corridor intersections to go. Still nothing moves in the silence. We reach the elevator, and I move Cee to one side of the door and press the call button, covering the door as it opens, and a whole lot of nothing leaps out at me.

"In the elevator, Cee," I order.

I follow her into the elevator and press the button for the flight deck.

As the elevator doors slide closed, I see mutants running towards me down the corridor. These mutants are not behaving normally. Apart from the one I wounded with the ricochet round off the wall, none of them made any sound as they attacked, and they don't seem to be bothered by the enclosed corridors. I've never known mutants to stalk

their prey like these or set up what looks to me like an ambush. These mutants are a whole lot smarter than the Earth version. Either that, or they just got used to working together in the closed environment of the ship.

The elevator doors slide open, and again nothing is waiting for me in the corridor as we step out. I press the emergency stop on the elevator to keep it jammed there. I don't want these smart mutants coming up the elevator after me.

There's nothing in the corridor as we head for the flight deck. Cee is silent, but a shudder runs through her now and then. I'm worried the suit may not have protected her and she's been infected by the mutants somehow. I don't know what the symptoms of the mutant infection are. I've only ever seen the end result.

The doors in the corridor are still closed and the hatch to the flight deck still looks closed and secure.

We reach it, and I listen at the hatch just in case. There are no sounds from the other side, which means nothing with the silent mutants, but I feel better for checking anyway. I open the hatch and step inside to check, sweeping the weapon around the interior and looking for targets. Nothing moves and I wave Cee inside the flight deck and pull the hatch closed and locked behind us.

"Stay here," I order, indicating the hatch we've just entered. I move through the flight deck, checking for targets and checking the rest of the hatches. They're all still closed and securely locked. I make my way back to her, checking again for targets as I return.

"Turn around," I order her. I examine her suit as she turns around in front of me. There are no marks on the suit.

"Now check me. Look for any marks or stains, but don't touch them," I tell her.

I stand in front of her and slowly turn around so she can examine me.

"There's a mark on your back," says Cee.

"You can take your helmet off and look around," I tell her.

Cee moves away from me and goes to the consoles while I strip the combat suit off, careful not to touch the saliva mark on the back of the suit. I don't want to get the stuff on me and then accidentally contaminate Cee. I unlock the hatch and drop the combat suit outside, locking and securing the hatch again.

I head to where Cee is examining one of the consoles. Cee looks up from the console she is studying. Her face suddenly turns bright red, and she looks back at the console.

"Your face is red, is anything wrong?" I ask, worried. Maybe the red face is a sign of the mutant infection.

"Umm, you're naked," Cee mutters.

"Is that a problem?" I ask, surprised.

"Well, yeah, it's not proper," Cee explains.

"It's not?" I exclaim.

"Well, no, you're not supposed to go around naked with strangers."

"Oh, I didn't know. Sorry," I reply, a little confused. "So why is your face red?" I ask.

"Because you're naked and I'm embarrassed," Cee snaps, furiously studying the console she's looking at.

I'm confused and I don't know what to say. I get the spare EVA suit Cee carried from the JatBee and dress. In the compound, we'd never worried about being naked, although we always wore the black suit all the time. Everyone lived, ate, showered, slept, and died together and pretty much we were all strangers to each other. We never got to know anyone and apart from our patrols we had nothing to get know each other about anyway. I guess it's one more thing I didn't learn from the Net. I wonder why it's a problem. Could I ask her? Should I ask her? Would that be wrong too? I'm starting to miss my nice, simple life of patrol, kill, eat,

sleep, and browse the Net. Talking to Margaret, Susan, the Sergeant, Colonel Lewis and now Cee, I'm way out of my depth.

I listen at each of the hatches. Nothing, no sounds, just silence. I head back to Cee.

"Do you understand all this?" I ask, waving at the consoles.

"Most of it," Cee replies.

"Do you want me to translate anything? I can read Gorkn," I tell her.

"So can I, it's a mandatory subject for all space flight crews."

"Well, can we move this thing?" I ask.

Cee glances up at me from the console she's studying.

"Yes, I can move it. I can override the navigation officer check. The reactors are online. All systems appear operational," Cee replies.

"Let's do it, then," I tell her.

Cee pulls up the hologram navigation display, and the globe of the earth and the moon appear. She traces a curve in the space and a circle around the earth and enters a command on the console.

At the flight console, she enters more commands and pushes the large lever-shaped throttles forward. Lights and consoles light up, displays change, and as far as I can tell, nothing else happens.

"Well, when do we start moving?" I ask.

"We are. There's a lot of mass in the ship to move and it's going to take a little while before we gain any velocity. We also want to keep our velocity down, so we don't have to do too much deceleration when we enter Earth orbit," Cee explains.

"How long before we reach Earth orbit?" I ask.

"About 24 hours."

"In that case, we should decontaminate the ship on the way."

"And just how are we going to do that?" she asks.

“There’s an emergency decontamination system in the life-support system. All we need to do is put on our suits and let the ship decontaminate itself,” I explain.

“Are you sure?” Cee frowns at me.

“Nope, but I can’t think of anything else and without my team, this ship is way too big to clear the normal way,” I reply.

I collect our helmets and hand one to her. We adjust and check each other’s suits.

“Ready?” I ask, in the suit helmet radio. Hey, pretty cool the way my breathing echoes in here.

“No, but do it,” Cee replies.

At the ship management console, I pull up the Life Support menu and select Emergency Decontamination System. Another selection appears. *Is the Contamination Airborne/Particle?* I select *No* for that.

A warning message appears on the console display asking: *Confirm Selection*. I press the confirm button and a five-minute countdown begins, along with sirens and flashing warning lights.

Pictures appear on the console. They look like empty cylinders, and a message underneath announces: *Air system will be recycled and decontaminated for reuse at the end of the decontamination cycle.*

We wait and five minutes later, the empty cylinders start to fill. While we wait for the cylinders to fill and the hatches to open, Cee checks our flight status, while I find the ship surveillance system. I study it for a minute and set the system to scan for any moving object and to generate an alarm if it finds something.

It takes an hour for the cylinders on the computer display to fill and then every hatch in the ship opens, including the ones on the flight deck. I’d forgotten about that minor detail. I race up the steps to the flight deck hatch, clumsily grabbing my weapon on the way. The bulky suit gloves make using my weapon awkward.

I check and watch for mutants or movement. I check each hatch into the flight deck. There's nothing. No movement and no shadows down any of the corridors. The decontamination cycle will last for five hours. We settle down to wait and I watch the hatch entries for anything looking for a free feed.

It's been a long five hours, sitting in silence. I haven't heard the sirens in all that time. There's no air for the sound to travel, but the lights have flashed the entire time. At the end of the cycle, the external hatches close and seal, and I close and secure the flight deck hatches.

The ship surveillance system hasn't once sounded or displayed an alarm. We watch the green cylinders on the life support system empty, and slowly hear the sirens come back to life as the air returns. When the cylinders are empty again, the sirens and the flashing lights stop. Another message appears on the console: *Decontamination Sequence Complete. Life Support Systems are Normal.*

I open my helmet and with a slight hiss, the air pressure equalises. Air to breathe. All good, and Cee takes her helmet off.

"Well, that wasn't so bad, was it?" I ask.

Cee gives me a half smile. "As long as it worked, I suppose not," she replies, going back to her flight console.

I shrug and go back to watching the surveillance system and scanning through the captured security images. There's me and the mutant fight. Then more of me, me and Cee, and further back nothing.

I look for any images of the mutants. There are only brief captured images with no long tracking sequences like there are of me. It worries me.

How can I be certain the decontamination sequence worked? Wouldn't the crew have tried it? Only problem is, they would only have needed a single infected crewmember after the cycle completed, for it all to start again.

I change the view on the surveillance cameras to the hangar. There's our JatBee just as it was when we left it, and the rows and rows of Gorkn JatBees and fighters all neatly lined up, along with mutants climbing out of the cockpits. WTF! I stare at the screen in astonishment.

They really are very smart mutants. I watch in amazement as they climb out of the parked fighters and the Gorkn version of our JatBee. I race to the life support system and start pulling up menus. Here it is. I remember seeing it when I was browsing the menu list: *Hangar Security Seal*. I touch the screen, and the *Hangar Depressurise* selection, and race back to the surveillance system to view the results of my handiwork.

The mutants are running for the fighters and the Gorkn JatBees. I watch as they climb into the ships and the hatches close. Some don't make it, and they collapse on the ground as the air in the hangar runs out. The ships sit there, quiet, and still.

So, they're smart enough to get in the ships, but not smart enough to fly them. Good. I check the surveillance footage of the hangar hatches. It doesn't look as if any of them have got as far as the hatches before I operated the hangar seal. I can't be certain, though.

"Cee, we have mutants in the hangar," I announce. "They're hiding in the ships."

"What?" Cee exclaims. She comes to look at the surveillance system with me. "Where? Show me!" she demands.

I zoom the camera in on a cockpit and there, sitting in the cockpit of a fighter, is a mutant.

"Right there," I say.

"What do we do now?" she asks.

"I guess we do it again and then I go down there and shoot them in the cockpits," I reply.

We do it all again. The whole Emergency Decontamination routine. Five hours later when the cycle ends, I make sure the hangar is still depressurised, and we watch the cockpits.

They don't open, the cockpits remain firmly closed and the mutants remain safely inside the waiting ships. I'm going to have to go down there in an EVA suit and kill them one by one. I'm not that excited by the prospect.

"Cee, I'm going to go down there. You stay here and keep the flight deck hatches locked and sealed. When I get into the hangar, I want you to pressurise it but keep the hangar sealed so nothing can escape into the main ship," I tell her.

"What are you going to do?"

"When the mutants get out of the ships, I'll take them. It'll be easier than working my way down the rows, and I'm not keen on fighting in this suit and helmet. I can't hear anything, and using this is awkward at best," I reply, indicating the bulky suit glove that barely lets me grip my weapon.

I collect my helmet and check weapon load.

"Remember, don't open the hatches. Keep them locked and sealed from the inside," I remind her. I step out and close the hatch behind me. I hear it lock and test it. Nope, I can't open it. Good.

I walk down the corridor carrying the weapon and helmet and listening intently for the patter-patter-patter sound. Nothing tries to eat me, but the bodies in the corridor where the mutants ambushed us are gone. Apart from the scars on the walls from the weapon rounds, there's no indication a fight had even occurred.

Reaching the hatch for the hangar, I realise I need an airlock to get into it since it is depressurised. I retrace my steps to the map on the wall and examine it. Marked on the map in the next corridor is an airlock. I find it and enter and secure the hatch and check my helmet before starting the airlock cycle.

"Cee, secure the hangar and pressurise," I order on the radio.

"It's done," Cee replies.

I try the airlock hatch. It won't budge. The next one is also locked. I turn to watch the waiting ships as the air pressure builds. A green light comes on in my helmet indicating the air pressure outside is acceptable. I remove the helmet and gloves and wait.

The Gorkn fighter cockpits and JatBees start to open. Mutants appear, snuffling around as if they're searching for something. They are completely silent as they do it. They are nothing like the mutants on Earth who are constantly screaming and howling at each other and everything around them.

I raise my weapon and find a target. Red dot and fire. Again, and again and again. I patrol along the walkway, targeting and firing as I move.

The mutants react by running and hiding. They're trying to stay out of my line of sight and there appears to be a lot more mutants in the hangar than I thought.

I work my way around the walkway to the end. I'm very close to the shimmering field where the hangar door should be and it feels as if I'm just a few meters away from the start of an infinitely long fall. The view is mesmerizing. The black of space and the glow of the stars. It's so tempting, it would be so easy. A few steps and I could fall forever.

I shake my head and tear my eyes away from the shimmering field and the darkness beyond and start back again. It's a long walk, probably a thousand metres and about half the length of the ship. I patrol down each side of the hangar. There are plenty of places for the mutants to hide.

I've walked the length of both sides of the hangar and now I head back to my helmet and gloves, finding very few targets as I go. I'll get Cee to depressurise the hangar again to force any hiding mutants out into the open.

I'm almost at my helmet when a large group of mutants suddenly appear, leaping up the steps from the deck below and charging toward me. They're carrying things, large tools and pipes, anything that's easy to carry in their talons.

They run in total silence, waving the makeshift weapons. I kneel and raise my weapon. Target, fire. A mutant drops to the ground, a gaping hole in its chest, and something comes hurtling through the air and hits me. They're using the objects as weapons and throwing things at me!

These mutants may look like the ones on Earth, but their behaviour is very different, except in one regard, they still want to eat me. I duck the larger objects and target fire on the incoming running mutants. There's a lot of them.

Suddenly in the radio I hear Cee yelling, "Jaina, behind you!"

I glance behind me and find more mutants, coming in fast. These things are learning far too quickly and now I'm caught on the walkway between two incoming mutant packs. I have maybe three seconds before one group or the other reaches me. I turn and run for the railing, leap to the top rail and jump.

It's a good fifteen meters to the deck. If I don't land on the top of the JatBee I'm aiming for, I might be in trouble. Behind me, the mutants finally scream in frustration and follow me over the railing.

I hit the side of the JatBee and slide down, scrabbling for something, anything to grab hold and stop my fall. My hand finds something, and I come to an abrupt halt, hanging by my left hand on the side of the JatBee with my weapon in my right. I thumb the automatic fire switch on the weapon and target the mutants who reach the JatBee. Mutant bodies fall past me. I don't need a mutant body hitting me just at the moment.

I glance down past my dangling feet. It's no more than a three-meter drop, no problem. I let go of my handhold and drop to the ground, still targeting and firing.

There are mutants everywhere. A lot of them get to the side of the JatBee as I did, but a lot miss too and they hit the ground, sometimes breaking something in the process. Anything moving gets a round.

Move, run, target, fire. I need to get to the walkway, or at least somewhere where I'm not in the open and having to cover everywhere

around me. I back toward the walkway steps. Target, fire. There's a fighter nearby. I can use the cockpits too.

"Cee, depressurise the hangar!" I yell into the radio.

"But you don't have your helmet," exclaims Cee.

"Just do it. I'll use the fighter cockpit like the mutants do!" I yell back.

The air pressure starts to drop as the hangar depressurises. The mutants break and run for the fighters and JatBees. Left to my own devices, I climb into the fighter beside me and pull the cockpit hatch closed.

The contoured seat is far too big for me, and I can't see over the edge of the cockpit. The Gorkn are taller than humans and the cockpit reflects that. Everything is further away, and the cockpit is bigger overall than a typical human fighter cockpit. The fighter's life support system starts up automatically, and lights, displays and various systems start up. I guess it makes sense to automate most of the start-up sequence. A pilot in a hurry would only need to strap in, hit the ignition and throttles, and hold on tight.

I sit and wait, studying the console and instrument panels. It all looks familiar and remarkably similar to the JatBee control systems. Typical throttle/flight control arrangement, navigation, scanner, life support systems. Target management and weapon systems, weapon fire control mounted on the flight control. With minor differences, like the size, reach and placement of certain controls, it could definitely be a typical human fighter cockpit.

"The hangar is depressurised, Jaina," announces Cee on the radio.

"Thanks," I reply, my finger hovering over the ignition switch.

I grimace and remove my finger. Maybe later I can take this thing for a spin. I kneel on the seat and peer over the edge of the cockpit. Dead mutants lie on the ground and nothing moves. Time to do it all again.

"Cee, make sure the hangar is sealed and pressurise it," I tell her in the radio. "And is there any movement on the surveillance system

“Pressurising the hangar now and apart from the hangar, there has been no movement on the surveillance system,” Cee replies.

A light in the cockpit turns green and I push the hatch open. Mutants are emerging from the fighters and any in sight I drop with a round from the weapon. I exit the fighter and head for the steps to the top of the walkway.

Shadows and movement, brief glimpses of the mutants as they run and hide. I reach the walkway, retrieve my helmet and gloves, and secure them to the belt clips of the EVA suit. I patrol along the walkway. The mutants run and hide, always out of my line of sight. Occasionally I duck, as a pipe or wrench hurtles my way. There’s no way I can clear the hangar, there are just too many places for the mutants to hide.

“Thedra?” I ask aloud. A delay, maybe she still can’t talk to me.

“Yes, Jaina,” replies her voice in my head. Awesome, I have contact with Thedra again.

“Can you control the Gorkn ship, and more importantly, the Gorkn fighters and JatBees?” I ask.

There’s a pause of a few seconds before Thedra replies. “The MacJet and JatBee planes are based on Gorkn technology. Assuming the remote-control facilities also exist in the warship and the fighters, then yes, I can control them. I will need a remote access terminal to the ship, though.”

“Will the field computer do?” I ask.

“Just,” replies Thedra. “It will need to be hardwired in. Preferably to the main system.”

I still have the field computer in my pack, but I don’t have the technical skill to connect it to the main ship.

“Cee, could you connect a field computer to the ship’s main computer?” I ask in the radio.

“I suppose so. There are external interfaces on some of the consoles here,” replies Cee.

“Cool, in my pack is a field computer. Can you connect it to the Gorkn system somehow?” I ask.

“Yeah, found it. Why?” Cee asks.

“Thedra is still connected remotely to the field computer. If she can get access to the main ship, she might be able to remotely control the Gorkn JatBees and fighters,” I reply.

“I’ll see what I can do,” replies Cee.

As I wait, I continue patrolling around the walkway and targeting anything that moves in my line of sight. The mutants hide, staying out of sight and range. From the way they are moving, they are obviously heading for the hangar hatches to escape into the body of the main ship.

“Jaina, I’ve connected the field computer to the main ship,” announces Cee on the radio.

“Thedra, do you have a connection to the ship?” I ask aloud.

“I’m working on it now,” Thedra replies.

There are still no targets to fire on. The mutants seem to be gathering on the opposite side of the hangar from me and are out of range. I patrol back toward where they are gathering.

“I have control of the ship, the fighters and the JatBees. What do you want me to do?” asks Thedra in my head.

“Fly all the craft out of the hangar. I want the field cleared so I can clear the hangar,” I tell her.

The fighters and JatBees start lifting and heading out of the hangar, row after row of them. Even the JatBee Cee and I arrived on, lifts, turns on its axis, and flies out through the shimmering field with the rest of the fleet.

Hundreds of fighters all leave the hangar, and the mutants are left in plain sight with nowhere to hide. I target and fire and they run at me. The hiding places are gone, and the fight begins. I have the high ground

while they have to get up the stairs to the walkway. There's nowhere to hide now.

I target and fire and the mutants fall. The weapon sound echoes in the empty hangar and soon I run out of targets. I patrol around the walkway, looking for anymore hiding places. There are equipment crates and supplies stacked around the massive empty hangar, perfect hiding places for the mutants.

"Cee, depressurise the hangar," I announce in the radio.

"Doing it now," Cee replies.

While the hanger air pressure drops, I pull on the helmet and gloves and secure the suit. I can't use the weapon now because the gloves make it all but impossible, but as the air disappears and with nowhere to hide, the last of the mutants run for the hangar hatches and die on the way.

"Thedra, you can bring the fighters and JatBees back in. Can you open the hatches on them when they land so we can make sure there are no hiding mutants inside?" I ask.

"I just need to override the safety protocols on the fighters," replies Thedra.

I watch as the ships return to the hangar and the hatches and cockpits open. There are a few ships with mutants still inside, but with no air and the hatches and cockpits open they don't last very long.

I wait until the very last ship enters the hangar, and after Cee removes the hangar security seal, I cycle through into the hangar airlock. I get her to put the security seal back on after I am inside the main ship, just in case.

I remove the helmet and gloves as I head back to the flight deck. I don't hear any sounds on my walk back. The patter-patter-patter sounds are gone.

"Cee, I'm outside the flight deck. You can unlock the hatch," I say on the radio.

The hatch to the flight deck opens and I step inside. Cee is waiting for me.

"You have stuff on the suit," announces Cee.

I look at the suit. There are patches of saliva on it. I throw the helmet and gloves outside the flight deck to keep my combat suit company and remove the suit, careful not to touch the outside of it. I throw it outside with the rest of the contaminated gear.

I close and lock the hatch to the flight deck, and check for any mutant body fluid on me. Nothing I can see.

Cee's discarded EVA suit is beside a console, and I pull it on. At least she won't have to be embarrassed because I'm not wearing anything again.

"How long before we enter orbit?" I ask, joining Cee at the navigation console

"About eight hours. Thedra is flying the ship, and it should be pretty easy now," explains Cee.

"Okay," I reply.

I gaze out the huge view screen at the slowly moving stars. Earth is now visible, dirty and grey. Huge swirling grey clouds cover much of the surface. It does not look anything like the pretty blue and white pictures I'd seen on the Net.

"We built a spaceship," announces Cee. I glance at her. She's also staring out the view screen at our home.

"What do you mean," I ask.

"Years ago, when NASA was privatised, the company that bought it started building a spaceship. Something big enough to carry twenty or thirty people and a couple of shuttles. Early versions of the JatBee. It was supposed to be a planetary spaceship. We didn't have FTL, but we had everything else. Fusion reactors, not like what the Gorkn gave us, ours were quite primitive in comparison," explains Cee.

“What’s NASA?” I ask.

“An old government space agency, it was sold off in the 50’s,” says Cee.

“So, what happened to this ship?” I ask.

“The Gorkn arrived, and it was all shut down. Why spend money on space research when the Gorkn can just give us fusion, inertia and gravity lift technology. It all stopped and personally, I think we went backwards. Orbital MacJets and JatBees. That’s all we have now,” says Cee.

“I thought the Gorkn wouldn’t share their space technology?”

“They did and they didn’t. They shared just enough to keep us amused, but not enough to really go to space. Without FTL, we can go no further than our solar system. With our space research shutdown and just the tech the Gorkn chose to share, we have no way forward,” explains Cee.

I look at her and frown. “That does’nt…”

“I know,” interrupts Cee, “the year I joined, there was a review of why the work was stopped. Six months in, the review was ended abruptly. No report, no review and according to rumour no-one who worked on it ever spoke about it. That was two years ago, about when the mutant incident started.”

Mutant incident. What a nice way to put it. But why shutdown our own space program just because the Gorkn arrived. I should ask Thedra, if I remember. It’s hardly relevant to me.

Cee has moved to what she calls the helm console. For a while, I watch her work before deciding to check the surveillance system again. Just in case.

I watch the events in the hangar, checking for anywhere that the mutants might still be hiding, and listening to Cee’s slow breathing as she dozes at her console.

I wonder if McTien’s benefactors had anything to do with shutting down the ship development or the review. McTien said I was Hastati.

Designed to take out the Gorkn and anyone associated with the P2D project. Except I don't see where I would fit in with a plan to stop earth space research. The review started two years ago, when the mutants started. That has to just be coincidence. The mutant problem would have taken priority, and a review of a long dead project would have been very low on the list of things to do. But I wonder what happened here. How did the mutants get aboard.

One of these consoles must be a captain/commander position. I wonder if there is a ship log. I go looking.

I find a console that looks like it might be a command position. The displays are multifunctional with no specific task allocation like the other consoles. I scroll through the computer menus until I come to one that says *Ship Log*. I search back through the log to the last few entries, dated 1834375.

The Gorkn calendar is just in days and not broken into days, months and years like on Earth. It just starts at an arbitrary day in their history and counts from there. The current Gorkn date is 1843650, which makes it about 15 years ago, Earth date. Right about when we lost contact with the Gorkn. I settle down in the oversized chair to read the log.

1834373, Ship Log, entry by Commander Hazzul

The human delegation arrived today, along with the dignitaries from the refugee ship. My officers and I are required to take the humans on a tour of the ship. I have submitted a formal objection to our Council Leader Hakroz in charge of the refugee fleet. Allowing a potentially unfriendly and hostile race on board our one remaining battle cruiser is an unnecessary risk. Hakroz assures me the humans are friendly and the exchange of technology for materials to repair and replenish our fleet is in our best interest. I remain doubtful. These humans are insistent that despite the technology we have already given them, we should also share our space and weapon technology. I can only advise the Council to deny the request. At the conclusion of the tour, the humans again made demands

for access to our space and weapon technology. They were most displeased the request was denied, yet again.

1834374, Ship Log, entry by Commander Hazzul

Four of my crew have been injured by some sort of creature. The creature has since vanished, and the ship surveillance system is unable to locate it. We have no idea where the creature has come from or how it got on board. A review of surveillance footage and security scans show no approaches by unauthorised craft with the exception of the refugee dignitaries and the humans from yesterday. Our usual clearance procedure for visits of this nature did not detect the creature.

1834375, Ship Log, entry by Commander Hazzul

The creatures are everywhere, and the security personnel are unable to control them. They have now spread throughout the lower six decks of the ship and many of the crew are missing or dead. The creatures excrete some sort of fluid, which burns on contact and which the medical staff are treating. All the decks are sealed, and a ship-wide decontamination procedure has been conducted. This should be the end of the problem.

1834376, Ship Log, entry by Commander Hazzul

Despite the decontamination procedure, the creatures are still on board and have now spread throughout the entire ship. We have conducted two more decontamination procedures, and still the creatures persist. Only the flight deck remains secure, and we are preparing to evacuate. I refuse to destroy the ship. It is our last remaining fleet class warship. We will perform another decontamination procedure at microbe level, which will purge the ship of its entire atmosphere. We will need to obtain additional water from the humans to replenish the ship atmosphere.

There are no more entries after that one. So how did the mutants get on board? How have they managed to survive for so long in a closed

environment? And how did this happen 15 years before we supposedly found the hidden nodes in the human genomes? It's a mystery.

"Thedra, can you search for any material relating to modified human genomes, visits to the Gorkn warship or mutant activity from 15 years ago?" I ask.

"What are you looking for specifically, Jaina?" asks Thedra.

"Specifically, I want to know how a mutant outbreak occurred on a Gorkn warship 15 years ago. Download the ship computer log and search that too," I reply.

I'm getting grumpy. Apart from ration packs, I haven't eaten since we left Earth and that was nearly two days ago.

Back on Earth.

With Thedra controlling the Gorkn warship, we enter Earth orbit and prepare to leave the ship for our flight back. General Petrov has requested we come to his dome located in the middle of France.

I sit in the JatBee co-pilot seat wearing a flight suit I found in one of the JatBee lockers while Cee and Thedra were flying the Gorkn ship. When we touch down outside the General's dome, there is an armed escort waiting for us. The wind has stopped, snow still covers the area, and our escort has us under close guard as they lead us to General Petrov's admin building. This dome is identical to the one that Colonel Lewis commands. It has the same tents, same trucks, just different people all complaining about the same things.

We meet General Petrov and two other senior officers who are waiting with him in his office.

"Jaina, it's a pleasure to meet you," greets General Petrov, holding out his hand. I take his hand and shake it.

"And you must be the kidnapped Commander Cee," Petrov asks Cee.

"Have a seat and tell me everything," says General Petrov, waving at a couple of chairs. The General and the officers sit and listen as we report on the Gorkn ship mission.

They make notes but are otherwise silent as we recite our story of the mutants and the ship, how we decontaminated it and what we found in the ship's log.

General Petrov sits back at the end of the story and looks at the two officers, who just look back and make further notes. The General turns back to Cee and me.

"Well, an excellent job. Even though unfortunately the Gorkn seem to have suffered the same fate as us, with luck we can use the ship as part of our rescue plea," Petrov announces.

"So, you do plan to ask the refugee fleet for help?" I ask.

“Yes, we do. We see no other way out of our current predicament. While the mutants are no longer roaming in large packs and threatening the secure cities, they are still mobile and moving around. It seems the extreme cold has been more an inconvenience to them than a solution. In fact, the cold is more of a problem to us than the mutants. Our movements are severely limited, and we are pouring massive amounts of power into the cities to keep the population warm. The outlying towns and regions have been evacuated to the domes and the cities. All food is rationed, and within the year the food situation alone will be at a crisis point. There is only so much in the warehouses and storage silos, and the cold weather is wiping out what crops and agriculture we have mutant free access to. We have no choice but to ask for help from the Gorkn refugee fleet,” General Petrov explains.

“How long before the fleet arrives?” I ask.

“Based on what you’ve told us from your meeting with doctor McTein and our own investigations of doctor McTein’s records, we have approximately five weeks before the fleet arrives,” replies Petrov.

“Any news of Jane and General Alexa, or information about who doctor McTein’s associates are?” I ask.

“We’ve identified most of the doctor’s associates. I believe the investigation is being finalised as we speak. Arrests will happen shortly after that. I don’t know the specific charges. No one seems quite sure what crime they’ve committed. As for Doctor Mathews and General Alexa, I’m sorry, but we have no news,” replies General Petrov.

“There is another more pressing issue. Our investigations have revealed that Doctor McTein and his associates still want you, preferably alive. We haven’t been able to determine the extent of his influence, so keeping you on base is out of the question. Instead, I’ve arranged for rooms in Paris and a credit facility for you. With the exception of the food rationing, the city is still mostly functioning as normal. Have a few days off and stay out of sight, Jaina,” explains General Petrov.

“I need to report to my commander,” announces Cee.

“Actually Cee, you’ve been temporarily transferred to my command, and you are to escort Jaina at all times. I’m sending her to Paris. No HK has ever been in a city or had to deal with the general population before. You’re to be her guide and liaison and keep her out of sight and out trouble,” replies Petrov.

“I can just stay here. I’m used to a bunk,” I announce.

“No. As I said, I want you somewhere other than the domes or a military base. Somewhere no one will look for you. I need you out of the way for a few days, and I want you to behave. No one is to know you’re a HK. I’ll send for you in a few days,” explains Petrov.

“Why, General?” I ask.

“Cee, these officers will brief you. Jaina, wait here,” replies General Petrov. We wait as Cee leaves with the two officers.

“Jaina,” says Petrov, “there are people who want control of you, and it appears they’ll stop at nothing to get a HK under their control. You’re the last one and remember what McTein said about re-programming you. Your original mission profile is over. Patrolling and fighting the mutants is no longer a priority for you. You just need to survive, stay out sight, and follow your primary protocol now. I’ll see you in a few days. Good luck,” Petrov stands, shakes my hand and shows me out the door.

I met Cee outside. The officers have disappeared, and Cee leads me outside the dome to a waiting private JatBee. We board the JatBee, and Cee takes us up and out, over the massive dome, heading for Paris. While I’m excited about actually seeing a city with people, I can’t say I’m all that keen either. I don’t seem to cope well with the general population.

“Why are we flying so slowly?” I ask Cee.

“We need to get changed and I need to ask you a few things. Can Thedra fly this to Paris?” Cee replies.

“Sure. Thedra, can you take over the flight please?” I ask aloud.

“Sure, no problem,” replies Thedra in my head.

Cee leaves the control of the plane with Thedra and leads me to the main cabin of the plane. She turns to face me, her eyes locked on mine.

"You're a Hunter/Killer and apparently the last. The rest of the HKs were killed in an action. You were commissioned 14 months ago and all you know is mutant fighting and killing. Any other knowledge you might have, you've gleaned from movies and the Net. Up until two weeks ago, you had never meet anyone outside your own environment. You require a lot of protein and carbs to survive, and you've killed three people in direct violation of one of your core protocols. Correct so far?" Cee demands.

"Yes," I reply, "although the three I killed are involved in a project that endangers the race and that overrode the 'don't harm humans' protocol," I tell her.

"I've been ordered to look after you and I'm to treat you as if you know nothing about life as a typical person. In fact, if I consider your age to be about eleven or twelve it would be about right," declares Cee.

I shrug and reply, "If you like. I'm not fussed. If General Petrov wants to keep me concealed, I'm just as happy to head back to Thedra's base and wait there. It's secure."

"They mentioned that. Apparently there have been a couple of attacks against the base. None came close to succeeding, but they're worried you won't defend yourself because of your second protocol. They've also ordered me to terminate you if it looks like you'll be compromised," says Cee.

"Yes, good idea," I reply.

"What!?", Cee exclaims.

"Well, you don't want an HK running around with a reprogrammed head that says kill all these people instead, do you?" I ask.

Cee stares at me in horror. "I can't kill you!" she exclaims.

"Well, you'd better keep me safe me then," I shrug. "When do we land?"

“Soon. Here, you need to get dressed. Put these on,” Cee says, handing me a bag and opening one of her own. She starts to remove her clothes to get changed.

“Do you want me to leave before you change?” I ask.

“What?” exclaims Cee.

“So, you don’t get embarrassed,” I tell her.

“No, no, it’s fine. Just get dressed,” Cee replies dismissively.

I shrug, open the bag, and pull out the clothes. There’s a long dress, bra and knickers, boots, a long warm coat, and a handbag. I strip and start getting dressed and I’m stuck on the first item.

How do I put on a bra? I’ve seen them on models on the Net, but I’ve never seen how to put one on. I sneak a peek at Cee. Right, like that. I get it the right way round, but for the life of me, I can’t figure out how to hook it up.

“Turn around, Jaina. Face away from me,” orders Cee. I turn away from her and she hooks the bra up. “Now these, like this,” she holds the panties for me. She helps me with the dress and zips it up. The long coat, wear it like this and the belt like this.”

Boots! I freeze. They’re high-heeled boots and I remember the first time I tried them. “I can’t wear those,” I tell her.

“Why not?” Cee asks.

“I fall over in them,” I reply, telling Cee the story.

“You’ll be fine. These are boots and they have a bigger heel. Put them on and I’ll show you how to walk in them,” she orders.

I reluctantly pull the boots on and slowly stand, gripping the edge of a seat in a death grip.

“First of all, you need to take shorter steps than you usually do, and when you put your foot down, put the heel down first, then the toe. Like

this," she explains. Cee walks to the end of the cabin and back. "Now you try it. Just take it easy and hold onto the seat if you like."

I feel tall and unstable. I can't fight in these. I step up on my toes to try them. Weird. I take a step, wobble, and grab the seat. Too far. I take shorter steps, carefully putting my feet down one after the other and I make it to the end of the cabin. I'm concentrating on every step and trying to take shorter steps.

"Good work, Jaina. Keep doing that until we land," says Cee, grinning and smirking.

We finally land, thank goodness. My ankles and calves are hurting already. As we leave the plane, I grip the rail on the steps as if my life depends on it. A car is waiting for us, and we sit in the back as the driver takes us to a hotel. Cee has all the details. I'm just busy concentrating on the boots.

We stop outside a large, elegant building and I discover it's even harder getting out of the car than it was getting in. It's another exercise in difficulty. Knees together, swing my legs out, stand, and hold the door in the death grip for balance. Take short steps. OMG, I want my combat suit and boots back. Cee holds my hand, and I hold the rail on the steps as we enter the hotel. The sign above it says "Le Meurice".

Inside the hotel are bright lights and bright shiny polished floors. I'm going to die here or seriously twist something. I take slow, short careful steps. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch Cee trying not to laugh at me. I make it to the safety of a chair and collapse in it.

"I'm staying here. You do whatever you have to," I tell her.

While Cee heads off to talk a man behind a long counter, I watch all the people going past me. There are women in impossibly high shoes and men in long black coats. Hmmm, I don't like the shoes, but I do like the look of some of the long black coats.

There are more people sitting around talking and drinking. The women all sit on the edge of the chair, their backs straight, while the

men slouch back in the chairs and relax. I guess I should be sitting straight like the other women, instead of slouched in the chair. Nah, I'm not moving.

Cee finally comes back. "Come on, Jaina, almost there," holding her hand out for me. I glare at her and drag myself carefully upright.

With only one scary moment when I nearly slip, I make it across the shiny floor and into the elevator. Carpet. Thank you, thank you, thank you, and into our room.

The room is huge, well I think it is. There are double doors to an entrance foyer. The entrance foyer opens onto a huge room with a polished wooden table with chairs. Past the table are low lounge chairs surrounding a large screen TV. Leading from the lounge room are two more rooms, each with a massive bed against the far wall. All the furniture is weird, old-fashioned stuff, and the windows in the bedroom overlook a noisy street made silent by thick glass. The last room and the closest to the door, is the bathroom complete with a huge deep bath.

Cee is talking to the porter who bought some bags up with him, while I gaze longingly at the huge bath in the gleaming clean bathroom.

I wait until the porter leaves. "Right, I'm in the bath. See you in a while," I announce.

I ditch the coat and the torture boots and head straight to the bathroom, where I puzzle over the taps. I turn them until water comes out and then find a thing to put in the bottom of the bath to stop the water running out.

"You all right in there, Jaina?" yells Cee.

Probably. Maybe. I think. I'm sure she's enjoying this. I really need a meal. I've been getting progressively more and more irritable.

Cee walks in, adjusts the taps and pours some stuff in the bath which turns to bubbles.

"You do need a bath," she announces sniffing me. "Need anything else?"

"Yes, food. Steaks and carbs," I tell her.

"How do you like your steak?"

"Big, thick, and rare. Two of them, that will do to start," I reply, watching the bath fill.

"Two?" Cee asks quizzically.

"Yes, two. Big, rare, hungry, feed me," I reply. There's steam coming off the water and the bubbles are mesmerising. "And can you help with this dress, please?" I ask.

She unzips the dress and the bra for me, and I step into heaven. OhhhhhMG, a hot bath! I lie back and close my eyes. The water smells of flowers or something. I'll ask Cee later. I've never had a bath before, just showers, and lately it seems like nothing but cold ones at that.

I lie in the bath soaking. I duck my head under the water and run my hands through my hair and over my face. I didn't realise how much my hair had grown in the last few days. I use a sponge thing that's sitting on a little shelf on the side of the bath and wash myself. I'm clean again at last. The bath is hot, steam comes from the water, and this is just wonderful.

"Jaina! Your dinner is here!" yells Cell.

"Bring it in here. I'm not getting out," I yell back.

"You can't eat in the bath. Get out here and eat your dinner while it's hot," she yells back at me.

I need food. Muttering to myself about bossy women, I get out and dry myself on the towel. Ooh so soft. I'm keeping this. There are robes hanging on the door. I take one and wrap myself in it. Warm and soft. I'm keeping this too.

I find Cee in the main room at the table eating. There's a huge meal waiting impatiently for me to eat it. Oh, more heaven in my mouth. It tastes amazing.

"Well, at least you smell better," Cee announces.

I grin at her. “I’m not finished yet. That bath still has my name on it,” I tell her between mouthfuls of amazing food.

Cee turns the TV on, and we sit, eating and watching. It’s some old movie about a guy lost on a remote island somewhere. I finish my meal and head back to my bath. I lie back down in the bath and turn the hot water on for a bit. A little bit more, that’s nice. I close my eyes and soak.

“Here, try this,” announces Cee.

I open my eyes with a start. Cee is standing over me with a tall glass of bubbling golden liquid. I take it from her and sip it. It bubbles and tickles my nose. It’s quite nice.

“Sip it, don’t gulp it all down. It’s expensive,” she orders.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Champagne, it’s a type of French wine.”

Cee leans forward to me with her glass outstretched. “Touch your glass to mine,” she orders. I touch her glass with mine, there’s a soft chime and Cee says, “Cheers.”

“You’re supposed to say, ‘cheers’ as well.”

“Oh. Cheers, Cee,” I reply, leaning back.

The champagne is nice. I feel warm inside as well as outside. The bubbles smell nice and the mutants are far away. I lie back and Cee leaves me to my bath. Eventually I make my way to a big, soft bed with big, soft pillows and it is oh so comfortable.

In the morning, I wake to a smell with my name on it. I have no idea what time it is, but the smell of food is calling me. Cee is waiting at the table again with more food. I recognise eggs, bacon, beans, orange juice and toast from pictures I’ve seen on the Net. I feel really good, relaxed and clean.

“Morning, sleepy head,” greets Cee.

I smile and say hello back and move on to the more serious stuff. Eating.

“You really do eat a lot, don’t you?” she says, between mouthfuls of toast.

“I like food. We only ever have steak and carbs in the compound, nothing like this,” I reply.

“Well, we’re going shopping after this and you’re getting your hair cut. It looks like a rat’s nest,” says Cee.

“Can I get some normal shoes though?” I ask.

“Maybe, if you behave,” Cee replies with an evil smile.

We spend the days shopping and seeing the tourist sights of Paris. Cee takes me to a couple of nightclubs, but I don’t really care for that. Lots of people, too much noise, and guys keep trying to either touch me or chat me up. Cee decides I’m not ready for that sort of thing, so we don’t stay long, which pleases me no end.

Cee tries to explain the niceties of social interaction to me.
I struggle with most of it, what to say, what not to say. Who cares? I just say what I know, it’s all I know, and apparently, I don’t know very much.

People, clothes, how to dress, relationships. I know how men and women recreate, I found that out with a lecture after my first patrol and the Net expanded on the subject, but the rest of it all sounds complicated.

I like shopping and I like the long black coat I bought. My hair looks good now and I’ve tried all sorts of food, most of which I love, although I don’t much care for Brussels sprouts.

On the fifth day of my first and only R&R, I receive a call from General Petrov. Jane and General Alexa have been located. The only problem is, it’s in a research centre hidden deep in South America and it’s full of mutants.

I ask General Petrov for a new combat suit, a weapon with spare ammunition blocks, a JatBee and the location. He informs me it's already waiting at the airport but there's no backup, because there are no units to spare. If I want to go, I go alone which is fine with me. I'm surprised he even considered backup units. We've never had them before.

The Hidden Compound.

I drop Cee off at her base in Florida, which she isn't too happy about and turn control of the JatBee over to Thedra. I glance at the nav screen and the terrain blurring past in the view screen.

The JatBee is screaming south, skimming low over the terrain, and travelling far faster than I could ever fly it at such a low altitude, but then, Thedra's a better pilot than I am anyway.

I check the nav system again. Thirty minutes to go. I get up from the flight seat and start checking my gear. There's a new combat suit and it's better than the old one and matt black, although I miss the shiny bits.

The new suit has the same electronic features, with extra padding on the forearms, shoulders, and lower legs. The helmet is better too and now it's all part of the suit and folds back into the neck of the suit. Nice, I decide. I don't have to carry the helmet if I'm not wearing it. And as a bonus, there's an HUD display duplicating the scanner display on my wrist.

The sword I wear against my leg instead of on my back. It's short enough to run from hip to just below my knee and I fasten it top and bottom to prevent it from swinging about. It's not as convenient for drawing, but it's out of the way and leaves my back free for my pack.

I pick up my weapon and check it. It's the same HKF and despite my initial misgivings, I've grown rather fond of the fusion weapon. It's turned out to be very reliable and very capable at putting big holes in things. I check the contents of the pack. Dry ration packs, water, ammunition blocks and trauma pack. That will do me.

"Thedra," I say aloud.

"Yes, Jaina," Thedra replies in my head.

"I'm ready to go," I tell her.

"Three minutes to drop off. The JatBee will be in high altitude orbit waiting for your call," Thedra replies.

“Roger,” I reply.

“One more thing,” says Thedra in my head, “if you’re compromised, the head chip will detect any attempt to re-programme you. General Petrov has requested you be terminated if that happens.”

I pause, thinking. If I am, I won’t know it anyway. I won’t remember anything. “Good idea. If I’m compromised and re-programmed, I’m ordering you to terminate me.”

“Good, that will cover any previous order nicely,” says Thedra.

I shrug at Thedra’s reply, pull the pack on and ready my weapon.

The JatBee slows and comes to a stop, hovering in the air. I drop the three meters to the ground and the JatBee leaves in a hurry. I head northwest to my destination. It’s only two kilometres, and I run at an easy pace through the jungle that doesn’t seem to be coping very well with the cold weather. The helmet display shows nothing that will bother me.

I crouch by a tree on the edge of the clearing and watch the mutants patrolling around the entrance to the hidden research lab. The entrance is an old mine tunnel and a pair of disused and rusted train tracks lead from the mine and disappear into the jungle. An ancient broken fence surrounds the area and the gates that once secured the fence are missing.

From my position by the tree, I can see probably sixty mutants in the area. They hunt through the rubbish and litter that lies about, occasionally screaming and howling at each other over something tasty. This is more like it. I know these mutants. They’re not like those smart mutants on the Gorkn ship. Although, why are they hanging around here?

I shake my head and shrug. Never mind, I’m in a hurry and the mutants are a delay I don’t need. I glance at the tree beside me. The branches are high off the ground. I could climb it and pick the mutants off from a safe height. No, I decide. I can’t be bothered, and it will take too long.

I switch the weapon to automatic, bring it to my shoulder and patrol toward the broken gates and the mine entrance. I fire in long bursts, sweeping the area in a long slow arc that decimates the mutants. The mutants scream and run for me, howling, and dying as the weapon sweeps over them. I finish off any wounded as I enter the tunnel and patrol into the darkness.

Mutants ahead in the helmet display. I like this new display. One shot, one kill. I patrol down the tunnel, target, fire, target, fire. In the distance ahead is a blinking light. I work my way towards the light and more dots in the helmet display. Except for shadows on shadows, I can't see anything in the dark tunnel. A sweep of the direction with my weapon on automatic brings screams and more dead mutants.

The blinking light is an elevator call button. With a sigh, I press the button. I'm beginning to hate elevators. The elevator door slides open and reveals a caged lift. I step into the cage and press the bottom button. As I descend in the caged lift, I change the ammunition load for my weapon. I may as well have a fresh ammunition block, rather than worry about the ammunition count.

I kneel by the back wall of the elevator cage as it stops with a slight shudder. The elevator cage door slides open, and the mutants are waiting for me. They die to automatic weapon fire as they try to reach me but are jammed together in the door of the elevator.

In a brief lull, I step over the dead mutants, weapon up, target, fire, and out of the elevator trap. There are more mutants running at me and soldiers returning fire. Rounds buzz angrily past me, kicking splinters and broken pieces of concrete into the air. That's a bit of a surprise.

I roll to one side and come up firing, sweeping the area and firing through room dividers and equipment. Screams and cries of the wounded. There's nothing like a nice big weapon blowing holes through everything. More dots appear in the helmet. Red and green, target, fire. I fire through the walls and equipment, at the red and green targets alike. The green dots are probably human, but since they are attacking me, it seems the second protocol has decided to take a nap somewhere nice.

The red and green dots stop coming and I work my way through the room. It's some sort of combined reception and admin area. There are dozens of desks and room dividers, along with dozens of dead mutants and guards. I stop and examine one of the dead guards. He's wearing body armour and camouflage gear. There's no insignia and his weapons are military issue. Mutants and military. I briefly wonder which military this soldier belongs too. I pull his sleeve up. The laser tattoo with his serial number is gone. So, he was Global Forces once.

I leave the body and open the door at the back of the room. A long corridor greets me, with more rooms leading from it. I work my way down the corridor, opening doors as I go. A room with a chair and straps, the next a surgical room with a mutant with the head of a man, screaming, strapped on a table. I put a round through him and pull the door closed.

The next has a woman, her arms and legs are those of a mutant. She screams at me, her eyes filled with pain. I put a round through her. There's nothing else I can do. They're already mutants.

More people and mutants in the rooms, all of them mutilated and chained. A mutant strapped to a chair, its head covered in a steel cowl and its body convulsing. On the walls are displays of weapon systems, manuals and fighting techniques. The images flicker past on the screen, weapons, manuals, pages, and pages of information. The mutant's body convulses, and it moans in pain, a long, constant guttural sound. I put a round through its chest, and it lies still.

I move back to the corridor. More mutants, and stray weapon fire ricochets down the corridor. I return the weapon fire, and it stops. Target the mutants, red dot, fire.

The next room has a child chained to the wall, its arms and legs are those of a mutant. The child's face is calm, and it smiles at me. I hesitate, my finger on the trigger and then the child opens its mouth and howls at me, the howl and scream of a mutant. I close my eyes and fire. I look away and walk down the corridor. I can't look at what I've just done.

The second protocol has decided it's had enough of a nap and has returned to see what I've been doing. The thudding pain in my head is growing into a red blinding haze filled with flickering fingers of lightning.

I follow the corridor to an office at the end of it. Weapon up, I patrol into the office. Four men sit calmly waiting, as if unaware of the destruction around them.

"Stand down, Jaina1798, code word Hastati," says one of the men.

I pull the trigger. Nothing happens. I squeeze the trigger again, and again nothing happens. I lower the weapon and wait.

"Good girl," he says.

He stands. "Have a seat," he says, offering me the chair he's just vacated. He pats me on the head as I sit down.

"You're quite remarkable," he says. He pulls my helmet up and it folds back into the suit. "The last remaining HK, smart, intelligent and beautiful," he announces.

"Who are you?" I ask.

"Your creator. We created you," he replies. "You're everything the Hastati were meant to be. Unfortunately, with the escalating mutant problem the programming process was rushed and unlike you, the HK became simple soldiers. If we had the time, it would be interesting figuring out what makes you different," he explains.

"Who are you? Why can't I move?" I ask.

"Who I am is irrelevant, well, it will be shortly. As to why you can't move, just a built-in safety feature in case you turn nasty. All the HKs have it. You can talk and think, you just can't act," he replies, with a slight smile.

He turns away from me to a tray by the wall and begins preparing a syringe. "But now, I'm afraid you're going to have to die. I have other needs for you and after you're suitably re-programmed and have

completed your next mission, well, then I can take the time to figure out what makes you so different," he says.

I can't die. I can't move. I watch him at the tray, the syringe in his hand. He taps the syringe and squeezes it a little. A yellow liquid squirts out.

"Don't worry, it won't hurt," he says, turning to me. "And you won't remember a thing. A new brain won't that be nice?"

"No!" I yell. "I'm Jaina."

"Not for much longer. Say goodbye to Jaina," he says.

He's close to me. The needle is ready to enter my arm. No, I can't die. The core protocol is pounding in my head, protect the race, protect the race. My head is full of blinding lights, and the pounding red haze is overwhelming. My mind is flickering on and off, lights flicker and explode behind my eyes. A white-hot lance of blinding pain runs through my head as lightning flashes and cracks in my skull and across my eyes. No!

My hand snaps up and the needle flies out of his hand and smashes on the floor. The other men start drawing their weapons and my weapon fires. Now my weapon is up and pointing at the man, who stares at me with fear in his eyes as he backs away from me.

"How? How did you do that? It's not possible!" he says.

"The core protocol," I reply calmly. "You put it there, you should know."

I pull the trigger and calmly walk from the room. The protocols are calm.

More mutants run and die, target and fire. I feel very calm and detached, as if someone else is doing this. More mutants and soldiers appear and die. Strange how the mutants don't attack the soldiers.

I follow the corridors, wandering the complex, detached and barely aware of my surroundings. Operating on automatic. A target, acquire and fire.

I enter a large room full of display cabinets, mutants, and soldiers. Operating on automatic and barely aware of my surroundings, I target and fire as I walk through the room.

I glance idly at the contents of the room. Old swords and skulls, bits of bone and broken pottery. Some sort of museum, I decide. There's a door at the other end of the room and I walk toward to it.

I glance to my right at a display and freeze. There's a skeleton there. Massive, three meters high, and on its shoulders is the skull of a mutant. The headache skips a beat and does a double take at what it sees.

I stop and stare at the display. A plaque at the base reads simply:

> Skeleton of an unknown human variant. This skeleton along with approximately ten thousand similar skeletons was uncovered in a large burial mound in Northern Scotland, in 1954. The specific location is unknown and with the exception of this specimen, the bones were crushed and destroyed.
>
> Damage to the C3 and C4 vertebrae indicate that cause of death was decapitation. The skull is carbon-dated at approximately 1000AD.

I stare at it. How does a mutant come to exist 1000 years ago? A bullet hits me in the shoulder, bounces off the reinforced bones and dislocates my shoulder. Not to be outdone in the pain department, the headache returns.

I swap the weapon to my left hand and return fire. My shoulder is not happy. I think the dislocation is worse than the damage from the round. I walk to the door, where two more soldiers appear. They duck back and using the wall as cover, they fire from around the corner. I shoot them through the walls and sweep the area on automatic.

I reach the door. Dead soldiers and a dead end to my left. I turn right, following a new corridor. I turn a corner and find a soldier kneeling on

the floor with his hands on his head. I target him and start to pull the trigger.

I stop and walk to him with my weapon targeted on his chest. I feel very lightheaded and very detached. The protocols have started buzzing around in my head like angry bees. My head pounds in pain with a red hazy headache.

"Take me to Doctor Mathews and General Alexa," I order him.

"Sure, sure, just don't kill me," the soldier pleads, nervous and scared.

"Lead on, hands on your head," I order him. He leads the way down the corridor with the barrel of my weapon resting on his shoulder.

He leads me through dozens of corridors and rooms, until we finally reach a set of stairs leading down. I've encountered no more mutants or soldiers, but an evacuation alarm has been running for a while now and the complex could be empty.

The soldier indicates down the steps. "Down there, in the cells," he says.

"Lead on, then," I order him, nodding down the stairs. The soldier leads the way down the steps to a long row of cells carved out of the rock, with steel bars like the bars of a prison cell for doors.

"Where are they?" I demand.

"There, down there," he replies, pointing down the row of cells.

"Get out, then. Run!" I snap at him. He turns and flees up the stairs. I walk along the row of cells. Nothing, nothing, nothing. If he's lied to me... I leave the thought there.

In the last cell are Jane and General Alexa.

"Jane, General!"

I grab the bars of the cell and wince from the pain in my damaged shoulder.

"Hello, Jaina," greets General Alexa.

General Alexa sits on a bed wiping water onto a woman's lips. Jane! I barely recognise her. They both look like they've been beaten, but Jane looks barely alive. I glance around for a key or something to open the cell door. I can't risk a round from the weapon on the lock. I drop the weapon to the ground and draw the sword. It slices through the lock like butter. The cell door swings open, and I step inside the small stinking cell.

I kneel on the floor beside Jane's bed. She looks sallow and pale.

"Hello, Jaina," says Jane with a faint smile. She raises her hand and strokes my face. "You were right, you do survive."

"We need to get you out of here and we need to get you medical help," I tell her. My head is pounding and drowning out the pain from the shoulder. Doctor Mathews looks like she is about to die. Her breathing is shallow, and I can't feel a pulse in the hand I hold.

"No, Jaina, I'm dying. I've been waiting for you. I knew you'd come," she whispers.

"No, you can't die. I need you," I tell her.

"I'm sorry, but I am. I have something for you. I've had to wait until you got here to give it to you."

She places a small cube she's been clutching into my hand. "It's been in my family for as long as anyone can remember. It's always been there, handed down from mother to oldest daughter. No one knows where it came from or what it's for, but I know... The first day I met you, I knew it was yours," she whispers.

I glance at the cube. It's old and the once square edges have become round from being held and handled. I close my fist around the cube. She takes up so little space on the bunk and she's dying. I kneel beside the bed and hold her hand until she leaves me.

General Alexa has sat waiting, and now he grips my shoulder. I wince in pain.

"Jaina, we have to leave," Alexa orders.

He's right. We need to leave. I stand and attempt to pick up Jane. I'm not leaving her here except I can't pick her up because my shoulder isn't working right.

"Let me help you. Turn around," orders General Alexa. "Close your eyes and just relax." He holds my shoulder and bends my elbow, turns my arm in to my body and then out, back in, and with a sharp stabbing pain, the shoulder pops in. Not pleasant at all, but at least I can move it again.

I pick Jane up and cradle her in my arms as we walk out of the cell. I stop and collect my weapon. With Jane in my arms and my weapon in my hands, I ask, "Ready, General?"

"Lead on, Jaina," he replies.

I retrace my steps, following the corridors and rooms as we head to the elevator. We pass through the museum room and the skeleton figure of the long dead mutant.

"Wait, Jaina," orders the General. I wait as he crosses to a cabinet. There's the sound of glass breaking as he takes something from the cabinet.

"Let's go," he says. I lead the way again.

A couple of soldiers turn a corner ahead of us, see us, and turn and run. We travel up in the elevator and out through the tunnel. Nothing and no-one is waiting to greet us or stop us. Outside the tunnel, Thedra has the JatBee waiting.

General Alexa walks to the flight deck as I carefully lay Doctor Mathews in a seat. She looks peaceful now, asleep in the chair.

As the JatBee lifts off, I spot vapour trails curving down toward the tunnel and the underground complex. I watch the mushroom cloud rising in the monitor as Thedra flies the JatBee north.

The tree still stands in the clearing. The site of my first compound, and the place where I'd first met Jane. There's nothing else here and no sign the compound ever even existed.

I dig Jane's grave beneath the tree, taking my time and thinking about my life. There isn't much to think about really and the red haze behind my eyes and the fire in my shoulder make thinking hard anyway. Better to think of nothing.

I wrap Jane's body in a field blanket from the JatBee, smooth the folds and make sure the tucks are neat. I lift her body and gently place her in the grave I've dug.

I've dug many graves. Buried team members on patrol and buried them at base. Team members with too much damage for the steel coffin to repair.

The last patrol, criss-crossing a continent. I briefly wonder if the dead were buried by the bots or left to rot. I shrug. Doesn't really matter, dead is dead.

General Alexa has sat waiting in the hatchway of the JatBee, watching me and saying nothing all this time. He's in a bad way and really needs medical attention, but he doesn't say anything.

I pick up the shovel and prepare to cover Jane with the dirt.

"Wait!" yells General Alexa. I pause and wait as he walks slowly to the graveside.

"I'll say the words first Jaina and then you can cover her," explains General Alexa.

He stands at the foot of the grave and recites a prayer. I listen to the words that mean nothing to me. Nobody ever said words to dead HKs.

Instead, I look at the blanket-wrapped body of my friend. I know the word, but I don't understand what it means. I feel a little sad we will never talk again. I think I'll miss Jane because she took the time to teach me. I consider that while the general speaks.

I miss my team, but they're replaceable and they have nothing new for me to learn. Yes, I decide. I feel sad because Jane always had something new to teach me. Yes, that must be what friend means. I watch General Alexa speaking. Not a friend, he has nothing to teach me.

General Alexa has finished speaking and he nods to me. I cover Jane's body with the earth I've dug and smooth it into a neat mound. With my knife, I carve away the bark on the tree down to the flesh of the tree beneath, and slowly carve: *Jane Mathews, July 22, 2077, Jaina's friend.*

I leave my weapon leaning against the tree and watch the tree with its little grave disappear through the window of the JatBee.

As we head for France and General Petrov, I sit staring out the window at nothing. A red haze covers everything. I know General Alexa is watching me, but he says nothing. He just watches me.

General Petrov is waiting to meet us at the airport, and I wait by the JatBee. I have nothing to do now and no one to save. I failed at that.

The two Generals talk for a long time, and they look at me from time to time. I think they're worried about me. A mentally unstable HK is probably a bad thing to have around. I've killed people, even a child. I wonder if I'm a murderer. I decide I am. I walk over to where the Generals stand talking.

"Jaina, this man is going to take you to the hotel," announces General Petrov, indicating a man standing by a car. "You are to wait there, and someone will see you soon. Do you understand me, Jaina?" he asks intently.

"Yes," I reply tonelessly. Orders are good, I decide.

I stand in the cold shower of the hotel. The water is freezing, and I stand in it shivering. The cold water is making the headache worse.

Good, I think to myself. I step out of the shower and dry myself with the floor mat. It's hard and cold.

In the bedroom, I lie on the floor at the end of the bed. I'm a murderer and a killer, a Hunter/Killer. I don't have hot showers, or comfortable beds. Children, women, men, chained and helpless. I killed them, executed them. Slowly and methodically as I searched jungle base.

The headache is back and the red haze over my eyes continues while I wait for darkness to come.

A man came to see me today. He talked and talked and talked. I sat and listened and didn't say anything. He went away and another man came. He shone lights in my eyes and talked to me as the other one did. After he left, I lay down with the pounding headache and waited for the dark to come again.

It's taking a long time to die. My body is objecting, but the headache is gone. I've counted the days since I became a murderer, marking them with bottles of water, which I refuse to drink.

There are five of them lined up. Men have come and gone. They talk to me and examine me, and after they leave the dark comes. Now and then, I hear voices in my head, echoes of the people I've killed. Jane even visited me. She sat and read to me for a while, a book of dragons and heroes.

My mind is finally dying. I can't remember things. My first team's names are gone, and I don't remember them now. I remember the helicopter though, and the screams of the men as they died. More people I've killed. I should have been there to save them. So many people I didn't save.

Another man came to see me. He has a syringe in his hand, and I let him put it in my arm. Finally, someone has realised the truth about me and come to terminate the mistake. Knowing I'm going to be terminated, the protocols are calm now. They don't hammer at me anymore.

As the needle goes into my arm, I whisper, "Goodbye Jaina."

A New Day.

“Jaina!” I open my eyes. A white ceiling and bright lights. I look down over myself at the hospital gown and flex my toes and fingers. Toes work. Fingers check.

“Jaina, stand up,” orders a man beside me. I stand, swinging my legs off the bed and flexing my shoulders. I feel tired and hungry, thirsty, and lethargic.

A military officer stands by the only door in the small room.
A pistol lies on the small table by the wall and two doctors with clipboards stand nearby.

“What’s your name?” asks the taller of the two doctors.

“Jaina,” I reply.

“Good, now pick up the pistol on the table and shoot the officer beside the door,” he instructs.

I walk to the table, pick up the pistol, turn, aim, and wait.

“No. That’s not what I do,” I announce quietly.

“What do you do, Jaina?” asks the doctor.

I place the pistol on the table and consider the question. What do I do?

I remember it all as the memories come flooding back. I remember the research lab and the deep, final sound of my weapon firing as it brings judgment.

The blinding, painful lightning, flashing and burning in my mind as the core protocols are broken. I remember the mutants, the soldiers, and the man with the needle. Killing the child mutant, I wince at the memory. Jane, Rosco, Tanya and all the dead HKs lost in the city blast. I didn’t save any of them. I didn’t protect any of them. What do I do?

“I...” I say with a long pause. “I don’t know,” I announce, puzzled. There’s something missing. I have a mission, but I don’t remember what it is. Something I need to do.

“What is it, Jaina, what’s bothering you?” asks the doctor.

“There’s something I have to do, but I don’t remember what it is,” I reply puzzled.

“It’s okay. I’m sure you’ll remember. Now, come with me,” orders the doctor. He leads me from the room and down a carpeted hall.

“In here, Jaina. Get dressed and come out when you’re ready. I’ll wait here for you,” he orders.

I open the door and enter the room. It’s just a plain room with a bed and my clothes on it. There’s nothing special, apart from a small painting on the wall of a prairie plain with a single tree.

I slowly get dressed. Jeans and t-shirt which I tuck in, a wide belt and runners, a sweater for the cold weather. I pull my hair back and tie it in a pigtail with the hair band. My wallet. I pick it up and check inside. A credit card and an ID card with my picture on it. I shrug and put the wallet in my pocket as I walk out the door to the waiting doctor.

“How are you feeling, Jaina?” he asks.

“Fine, but hungry and tired,” I reply.

“Good, we’ll get you a meal and you can rest. You’re going to be staying here for a while. I want you to rest and relax. If you need anything, or you need to talk to me, you call me. I’m staying in this room,” he says, pointing at the room where I woke up.

“Okay,” I reply.

“Here is your room key and your room is at the end of the hall,” he says, pointing down the hall.

“Thanks,” I say and walk down the hall to my room. I feel slightly confused, as if I’ve forgotten to do something, but I’m tired and hungry.

I run a bath and pour the bubble stuff in, watching the bubbles form and burst. I lie back and close my eyes. The water smells of flowers. I lie in the bath, soaking. I duck my head under the water and run my hands through my hair and over my face. The bath is hot, and steam rises from the water.

“Here, try this,” says a voice. I open my eyes. Cee is standing beside the bath with a tall glass of bubbling golden liquid.

“Hello, Cee,” I say, smiling. I take the glass she’s holding and sip the champagne. With my glass outstretched, I say, “Cheers Cee.”

“Cheers, Jaina,” replies Cee.

The champagne is nice. I feel warm inside as well as outside. The bubbles smell nice too. I feel calm and relaxed, and even my shoulder feels fine. Cee comes in now and then to refill my glass.

“Come on, time to get out,” she orders. I drag myself out of the bath and pull on one of the fluffy robes.

“Have you got any more of the champagne?” I ask. I feel lightheaded again. I really should eat.

“I’ll get it,” Cee replies.

I flop on the bed on my back, the room slowly spinning. Cee brings me a new glass of champagne, and I watch her put in on the table beside the bed.

“Anything else you need?” she asks, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“I probably need a meal,” I murmur. It’s very peaceful with my eyes closed, and the room doesn’t spin. Cee pulls the blanket over me and I roll on my side and curl up as the darkness rolls in.

Food, I can smell food. I open my eyes and blearily blink in the faint light through the window. I roll out of bed and walk to the door.

“And put some clothes on before you come out here!” yells Cee.

I find the robe from last night and join her at the table. Food, lots of yummy food. While I eat my breakfast, Cee tells me what’s been happening with her. She got a reprimand from her commander and a

promotion to go with it. Commander of the Gorkn warship, at least until the refugee fleet arrives and my babysitter for the next couple of weeks.

We spend the days shopping, which is now my second favourite pastime, the first is eating. We visit the tourist sights and walk the streets. It surprises me so few people seem worried about the planet climate or the mutants and there's even less talk about the impending arrival of the refugee fleet.

At night, we watch TV and old movies. The news has little about the mutants now, nothing about the HKs and the weather forecasters predict the cold weather to continue. No kidding.

I'm out shopping on my own today. Being out and alone in a city with thousands, millions of people is a significant moment for me. I've decided to buy Cee a gift, something I saw in a jeweller's shop. A golden ring with a cluster of tiny diamonds around a blue sapphire, it looks like Earth, surrounded by stars. I'm going to have it engraved: *Jaina*.

I walk into the little shop. The jeweller is an old man, grey, tired and wearing an immaculate black suit. He tells me how wonderful the ring is, and it will only cost me thirty-four thousand dollars. I hand over the credit card which he takes with a smile and puts it in a machine.

"I'm sorry, madam, but your card has been declined. Perhaps you have another card?" he asks.

"Oh! I don't have another card," I reply, bitterly disappointed. "I'm sorry for wasting your time," I tell him, taking the card and turning away. After four hundred days of patrols at a hundred dollars a day, I thought I would have enough. Obviously, my basic math is not the same as the math of those who pay me and it's something I need to discuss with someone. I just don't know who.

I turn to leave the shop and spot a picture on the wall of a face I know well.

"Rick!" I exclaim in surprise. I'm surprised to see him in a picture, smiling, happy and older, part of a life before I knew him.

“Madam, did you say something?” asks the jeweller.

“Sorry. No, nothing,” I reply, leaving the shop in a hurry. I’m not supposed to advertise who or what I am.

“Madam!” the jeweller yells, as he chases after me. “You recognise the man in the picture?” he asks, grabbing my arm.

“No, I’m sorry, I was mistaken,” I reply, pushing on.

“Please madam, he is my brother. I have not seen him for many months, and no-one knows where he is,” he says, catching at my arm again.

I stop fleeing from him and turn to look at him. He’s just an old man, tired and worn-out and his brother, my teammate, is gone.

“I’m sorry, I only knew him for a short time,” I tell him.

“He’s alive, then?” the old man asks with hope in his voice.

I hesitate before I reply and grimace, “No, I’m sorry but he passed away a few months ago,” I explain quietly.

His face was full of hope but now fades to sadness again. “Come back to my shop and tell me what you know,” he pleads.

“No, I’m sorry, I can’t. I have to go,” I reply, turning to leave.

Again, he catches at my arm, “Please, madam, I need to know,” he begs. There’s such sorrow on his face as he’s pleading with me to tell him of his brother.

“Okay,” I say quietly.

The old man closes his shop, flipping the sign on the door and bolting it the door. In the dim light of the closed store, I tell him the story of Rick. The Rick I know. Fast, funny and amusing. I tell him about the end and about the fight in the city. I tell him how sorry I am that he’s gone, that they are all gone. He listens to me in silence. I finish my story and watch him as he studies the photo of Rick in his hands.

With a sigh, he finally looks up from the photo. “Thank you, madam. At least I know what happened to him and I can lay his memory to rest,” he says.

I grimace. Thank me for what? I was supposed to help save you, and instead every HK is dead because of me. Regardless of what Thedra did, I called in the strike and I’m the one who’s responsible.

He pats me on the arm and guides me from the shop. I walk away slowly, lost in thought. Thinking of all the people I’ve lost, the people I barely knew, the ones I didn’t save. Mission status – failed.

I walk into the hotel room and call out to Cee, “I’m back.”

Through the open door to her room, I see her lying on the bed, her head twisted and her eyes wide open. Someone behind me presses a weapon into my back.

“Don’t move, Jaina,” orders a man behind me.

Three more men appear. They were hidden from sight when I first walked in and now, they advance on me. I’m looking, staring at Cee. She doesn’t move. One of the men has a syringe in his hand and I back away from him. I don’t want any more needles.

The man behind me hisses. “Don’t move or you’ll die like she did,” he snarls, pressing the weapon into me harder.

I freeze. Cee is dead. I don’t want to believe it. I stare at Cee’s face as the world, my world, turns dark and cold. Something dark and black rises inside me, covers my mind, and the world stops living.

I kill the first one with a blow to his throat. He dies choking, and unable to breathe. The next one, I nearly twist his head off, and the third I kill with a blow to his chest, crushing his ribs and stopping his heart.

I turn to the last one behind me, his gun clicking on empty as he frantically pulls the trigger. I drive the empty gun through his chest, cracking and snapping his ribs, and into his heart. His eyes open wide, and he gasps something as he dies. A name, lost on his dying breath.

I walk slowly to the bed and straighten Cee, arranging her body as though she just sleeps. I lie down beside her and hold her tight, as blood seeps from the gunshot wounds and into the bed.

Night comes and it makes my dark world even darker. I put the ring in my pocket onto Cee's finger and kiss her goodbye.

I pull the case from under the bed and open it. It's lain unopened all the time I've stayed here, but now it's time.

I strip, pull on the black suit, and pick up the two swords that lie there in the case. One glows blue and the other red, taken by General Alexa from the strange museum. I strap them to my back and collect the little cube Jane gave me. I haven't looked at it yet and I put it in a pocket for later. I walk out of the room, flipping up the helmet as I go and covering my face. All I am, all I have, I'm wearing. Serial number 1798, model HK, female.

I stride to the end of the corridor and plant my boot against the lock. The door flies open, crashing into the wall behind it. The two doctors lie slumped on the table with neat round holes in their foreheads and large messy ones in the back of their skulls.

I stalk out of the hotel. People scuttle out of my way as I stride through the main foyer. A deadly, calm, silent black demon from hell. I take the waiting car at the front of the hotel, pulling out of my way a man who is getting into it. As I drive away, he starts to chase me and stops. I watch him talking on his little phone as he disappears in the mirror.

I drive to the airport and show my ID to the guard at the gate. He opens the gate for me, and I drive straight onto the runway to a row of JatBees. I take the first one there. The radio yells and screams at me as the JatBee leaps from the tarmac and screams south, with the throttles pressed to the stops.

"Thedra," I announce aloud and toneless.

"Yes, Jaina," replies Thedra in my head.

“Who are the people who want me? Who are the people responsible for the mutants, and who are the ones who killed Cee and Jane?” I ask.

I wait. “Thedra, tell me!” I yell.

“They’re in a building at...” and she gives me the co-ordinates. I swing the JatBee west and lean against the throttles, making sure they’re at their stops.

The building is massive, towering into the sky. Made from glass and steel, it’s lifeless and soulless like the men inside who want me.

Except for the top floor, the building is dark and only the maintenance lights are on. On the top floor, bright lights stream from windows. I jump from the JatBee to the roof of the building and the JatBee slips away into the dark with Thedra controlling it.

I slice open the fire exit door. The swords feel familiar but clumsy. I have the knowledge, but not the muscle memory to use them. My weapon would be nice, but its leaning against a tree.

I stalk down the fire stairs and through the door into a foyer of elevators on the top floor of the building.

I cross the carpet and pushing open the only door in sight, I enter a brightly light room. Ten people wait for me at a large table. They sit sipping their drinks and chatting. Three of the ten are Gorkn. Slowly the conversation stops as they realise, I’m there.

“I believe you wanted me,” I announce quietly.

The man at the end of the table smiles at me. A smile of victory, smug. “Yes, we’ve been waiting for you, Jaina1798. Why don’t you stand down. Code word Hastati,” he says, grinning and thinking he’s won.

I walk across the floor, step onto the table, and walk the length until I reach him. Men and women sitting around the table lean away from me

as I pass. I kneel on one knee, the sword flickers in the air and the blade appears, pressed against his throat.

"I don't think that works anymore," I whisper to him. I press forward on the sword. He swallows and leans back. I follow his every move with the sword.

"Jaina, I'm sure we can come to an arrangement. We can pay well. Very, very well," he says.

"I don't think so. For a start, I don't need money. Machines don't," I reply. "And you killed my friends. I've only had two, and you killed them both. Now I'm going to kill you, but before I do, tell me, what are the Gorkn doing here?" I ask.

His eyes flicker to the Gorkn and back to me. "Business partners, nothing more," he replies.

"You lie," I snap, pressing on the sword. A single drop of blood appears at the tip of the blade. "And tell the guy behind me to lose the weapon or you die," I tell him.

He barely moves his head as he nods at a man behind me. I hear a soft clunk as a weapon is placed on the table behind me.

"Who are you?" I demand, easing up on the sword.

"Adams, JC Adams, and between myself and the people in this room we own the world," he answers, smiling.

"Nobody owns the world," I snap at him.

"But we do, Jaina. Power, heat, food, clothing, manufacturing, electronics, even you and the suit you're wearing, we made it all. Our companies run the world, and we control the world," Adams explains.

"What about the World Leaders? Don't they run the world?" I ask.

"Hardly. You yourself locked them out. They're nothing but puppets, paid puppets, and we pull their strings," Adams smirks.

I shake my head in disbelief. “Tell me about the Gorkn, and what you want me for?” I demand.

Adams grins at me, “But we don’t want you, we just want you out of the way,” he replies.

“What? Why?” I exclaim.

“With you out of the way, Thedra’s control will revert to me. We made her, we built her, and she belongs to me. With her back under my control, we will again control the domes, the planes, the wealth, the people, everything,” Adams explains.

“So why destroy the refugee ship?” I demand.

“The refugee ship destruction was necessary to force a worldwide system shutdown. Thedra was supposed to control everything via me when she came back online. Unfortunately, you got to her first and commanded her to obey only you, and we’ve been trying to remove you ever since. Since we needed a HK to get the Gorkn warship, Doctor McTein’s plan to control you was our first option, but you managed to kill him and without suffering a shutdown from your protocols. We moved General Alexa and Doctor Mathews to South America and told Petrov where they were. He dutifully told you and again the protocols should have stopped you and we would have had a HK as well as Thedra. Unfortunately, that didn’t go as planned either. Our last option was to terminate you, and we’d just organised that, when we heard you were shutting down from the protocol violations. We figured it was just a matter of time before we had Thedra. By then you were a bonus we were happy to lose, but then your General Alexa manages to get two of the HK doctors to remove the control protocols and save you. I mean really, what does it take to kill you?” Adams demands.

“And the Gorkn?” I ask, with a shrug at the question.

“Like I said, business partners. We need them to run the warship once we have control of it and thanks to you, we soon will have. Meet Captain Hazzul, his first officer and navigator,” announces Adams. I turn my head to look at the warship captain.

“How did you get the mutants on board 15 years ago?” I ask.

“It wasn’t 15 years ago, but to answer your question, DNA extracted from a mutant that died a thousand years ago,” replies Adams. “We didn’t know how to modify the genome back then. There was just enough extracted to create one mutant on the warship and make sure it spread to the refugee ship. We didn’t want the refugee ship alerting the rest of the incoming fleet,” Adams explains.

“I still don’t understand. Why?” I ask, still confused.

“Money and power you stupid woman,” snaps Adams contemptuously. “With the Gorkn technology Captain Hazzul has provided, we’ve grown immensely wealthy and powerful. The mutant outbreak on Earth was nothing more than a stupid mistake. We intended the mutants to be soldiers like the Gorkn mutants, trainable and controllable. Instead, they escaped and well, you know the rest,” explains Adams.

“And the mutants in South America were trained?” I ask.

“Controlled, not trained. My scientists are still working on that. But with Earth falling apart, it’s time to cut our losses and move on. We need the warship back in our control and that means we need a HK to kill the mutants onboard. We need Thedra in control of the world computer systems to transfer our wealth before we leave, which means a global shutdown and the easiest way to achieve that is to destroy the refugee ship,” explains Adams.

I study his face, staring into his eyes. Nothing, not a flicker. Not a moment of regret.

“So, to get your ship and your gold, you kill my friends, ice the world, and now all you need is Thedra?” I demand.

“Finally! I thought you were supposed to be smart?” Adams sneers.

I swing the sword in my right hand and shift the left one to JC’s neck. A man behind me screams as his severed hand holding a syringe drops to the ground.

“I may not be smart,” I reply, “but I’m good at surviving. Windows turn into mirrors at night.”

I step down from the table and slowly walk behind him. His eyes swivel to watch me. I move the sword from his neck and rest the blades on his shoulders. I lean forward and whisper in his ear.

“These swords are really sharp. When I sliced off McTein’s head, I think it took him nearly ten seconds to realise it. I reckon, if I slice your head off then as long as you don’t move, you won’t die. How does that sound to you?” I ask.

“You won’t, you can’t. You’re not a killer,” Adams replies calmly.

“Wrong,” I whisper, “you turned me into one.”

I lift the sword from his shoulder. It won’t take much, just a flick of my wrist, and Cee and Jane can rest in peace. The sword starts to swing.

“Jaina! No!” yells General Alexa. I freeze. The sword paused in mid-flight.

Through the dark lens and display of the helmet, I stare at the General Alexa. Laser dots from the weapons of the soldiers behind him are looking for targets. Men with weapons, fusion weapons I note move into the room, taking up positions and manoeuvring for clear field kill shots.

“Jaina. No!” orders General Alexa.

Dots in my helmet display, green dots. There is nothing to stop me now, I can take them all before they even fire a shot.

“Why not?” I demand. “He killed Jane and Cee, the Gorkn on the refugee ship and he, they created the mutants. He deserves punishment,” I quietly reply.

There is a darkness inside me crushing any thought of care or compassion. He is not a friend. I have no friends. Only people who would harm the helpless, the defenceless, the weak. The darkness wants to claim them. Claim the people at the table. Punish them for their actions.

I watch Alexa as he walks around the table toward me. More soldiers, with more weapons pour into the room. I watch them moving into position, still not enough to take me.

"We heard it all, everything. The suit transmitters and Thedra made sure. Now stand down," orders Alexa, walking past the seated men and women. A few of them wince at his words, others smirk and sip their wine.

Alexa stops beside me and places his hand on my shoulder. Looking at the men and women who have caused so much destruction, he leans close to me and whispers in my ear. "I thought you were more than just a HK. Was I wrong?" he asks.

I sheathe my offhand sword and flip my helmet up. I look into the General's eyes. "No, you weren't wrong. I am more than just a HK. You made me human and only a human can do this, not a HK. Never a HK," I reply. I flick my wrist and run for the window, which shatters as I dive through it.

It's a long way down. I twist as I fall, angling my body and the slipstream pushes me back to the side of the building. I draw the off-hand sword and drive both swords into the wall, using them to slow and halt my fall.

I hang from the swords and look down at a ledge about ten meters below me. I pull the swords from the wall and drop to the ledge, teetering on the edge and nearly completing my fall. From above and below, laser dots looking for a target roam the wall and the night. Like me, the soldiers will have infrared and night vision helmets.

I run along the ledge and smash through the next window into some sort of office. I jump the desk and open the door, checking the corridor. Which way is out? The roof will have planes and men covering it by now and judging by all the flashing lights on ground vehicles that I'd seen during my fall, the ground floor will be crowded.

"Thedra?" I ask aloud.

“Yes, Jaina.”

“Are you still with me or would you rather be with Alexa?” I ask.

There is a long pause before Thedra replies. “My protocols require me to protect the race and the HKs. What do you need?”

“I need a plane,” I reply.

“Run straight ahead. There will be a JatBee there.”

I run to the window at the end of the corridor and jump straight through it. The hatch is still closing as the JatBee screams into the night, and I roll to a stop against the wall.

“Thanks, Thedra.”

Thedra's Fortress.

I stand in front of the main system console watching the images from the satellites on the monitors in Thedra's control room. General Alexa has called every hour on the hour. Despite Thedra's arguments, I refuse to answer everyone. My heart is dark and cold and I'm not quite ready to face Alexa or anyone else for that matter.

I've wandered the fortress complex and found, amongst other things, a room at the rear of the control centre. The room is steel-lined and a metal chair with straps and a helmet sits in the exact centre. I've examined it carefully, looked over its systems and quizzed Thedra on it. It's a HK programming unit. Learning of its existence has made me consider my own.

The last few days, I've had a lot of time to consider my actions and my options. I don't have many.

I've been contemplating a fresh start. It won't be hard and everything is ready. All I need to do is sit in the chair and initiate the sequence. A simple injection followed by brain death. Install a new program and I can start again. The only downside is that I forget about Cee, Jane and everything I've learned along with everything I wish I hadn't learned. Of McTien and Adams. Of Hazzan and his officers. The men and women at the table, the expression on their faces. So certain they won't be punished. I'm not ready to do that, not ready to forget that.

"General Alexa is arriving in a JatBee," announces Thedra.

"Let him come in," I reply. So far, I've had Thedra chase off any approaching craft by simply not opening the main hangar.

I turn from the view screen to greet Alexa as he walks into the control centre. "Hello Alexa."

He's angry, very angry. I can see it in his eyes.

"Jaina. What you did is inexcusable. I have no choice but to arrest you and hold you for trial. You're to return with me," he announces.

"Why?" I ask. "I only did what you built me for. In case you've forgotten. Jaina1798, HK, model female, specifications available on

request. Current program mode, protect the human race at all costs. That's my job, but be sure to ask about our optional upgrades," I quietly reply.

"You also had a protocol that says you can't harm a human and if you want to go down that path, you're a HK with a broken program and you need to be repaired," Alexa retorts.

"Yes, you're right. I'm broken, but wait, I can be repaired under warranty, just a quick flick of a switch and presto, one pre-programmed human machine of your choice. Press two to hear about the optional upgrades and features," I throw back him, grabbing his arm and dragging him to the metal room.

I let him go and sit in the chair, the metal helmet hovers over my head. I put my arms on the bars. The metal straps snap up and secure my wrists.

"There you go, General. Jania1798. One Item Found. Manufactured January 26, 2076, and returned under warranty, defective. Now push the button, General. Fix your broken toy and don't forget to pick a new feature set," I calmly reply.

Alexa puts his hand on the button, ready to press. "No, you wanted to be human, not the programmed machine. The pinocchio child who wanted what all the other children have. Well, you got it. You don't get to escape the consequences of your actions by claiming you're just a machine. No. I took away the controls, gave you the choice, and now you live with your decisions and your actions, just like everyone else. Thedra, destroy this room," he orders.

The chair unclips and smoke billows from the consoles, sparks crackle, and the smell of burning plastic fills the air as the programming unit destroys itself.

I sit in the chair for a long time after General Alexa leaves. He's wrong, I didn't want to be human because I'm not. I was built for a purpose, a mission. Patrol, fight and die. It's the silent, unspoken HK motto. We fight and die, fight to die. Now, I have no mission and no purpose.

A dark hand grips my heart and squeezes. Adams. The men and women at the table. Perhaps they are worse than the mutants.

Was that what changed? I don't want to die any more. I hadn't wanted to die then either. Well, I don't think I did. Maybe I was a defective unit from the start. I slowly walk out of the destroyed programming centre and back to the main console.

I was built to protect the humans. I pause at the thought. The weak humans. I frown and nod to myself. Yes, the weak humans. Protect the humans from all threats. The mutants are not the only threat. I killed McTein without a second thought and the protocols didn't even whisper. The men in the jungle cave, not even a blink. The mutant child, the helpless woman, the chained men. They caused me grief. A lot of grief. The protocols had a lot to say about them. Nothing about the fully turned mutants or the soldiers firing at me, just the helpless humans slowly turning into something else.

I'm not sure what it means. I killed them all and I would have killed everyone at the table if General Alexa had not turned up. I frown again. I could have still killed them. They would have been dead, and I could have been in the JatBee and halfway to base before their heads hit the table. Well, at least on the JatBee. Hmmm, why didn't I? Why did I just do what I did. Was it because General Alexa ordered it. No, I don't take orders from anyone, General Alexa himself made sure of that. The soldiers in the room? No, standard issue soldiers in an enclosed space with a motivated HK, they would have more chance of surviving a mutant.

Why? Why did I stop. They deserved, what? What did they deserve? McTein, Adams, they told me what they did, what they wanted. The rest of the men and women at the table I don't even know. Why would I kill them? A feeling? Feelings get you killed. HKs don't do feelings. We just do our job.

I sit in the chair at the row of consoles and lean back. Calm, at peace, the black hand around my heart has vanished.

I take a deep breathe and relax. I could do with lunch.

The Cube.

What is that thing in my pocket? It keeps poking me in the thigh at the most inconvenient moments. I feel around and pull out the cube Jane gave me. She told me it had always been in her family, and no one knew or remembered where it had come from.

It's certainly old. It's, clear and made from some sort of crystal. The edges have worn smooth with the handling of a hundred hands. I hold the cube up to the light, turning it this way and that.

I shrug, it's just a clear cube and then the light catches a flaw in it. I look at it more closely, peering into the cube as I turn it this way and that. The cube has a flaw in the centre.

I turn the cube in the light, trying to see the entire flaw and then it comes clear. In the centre of the cube is the face of a happy, smiling woman and just in case I had any doubt, the woman has signed it. *Hi Jaina,* and put a smiley face at the end.

Shaking, I drop the cube on the console. The face in the cube, it's mine. Well, it could have been a thousand women but only one would look like mine, sign it Jaina, and cross it with a smiley face. Without a doubt, it's my face in the cube.

A hundred questions come to me. How do my face, my name and the smiley all get inside a cube that is so old that Jane's own family doesn't know where it came from? More to the point, how do I find out where it came from? It must be a coincidence. That's the only explanation. Any other explanation is going to make my head explode.

Concentrate on something else, forget the cube.

The General came to arrest me, because he thinks I did a bad thing ™. Maybe I did and maybe I didn't. Personally, I'm quite comfortable with what I did.

On the other hand, I need to find out how the cube came to be. I ask Thedra to research the cube. Two days of searching and moping about on my part and Thedra has absolutely no information about it in her databanks. The cube is a mystery and the only person who could have

answered my questions about it is dead. I decide there's only one thing I can do, face the General.

I take a JatBee and fly to General Petrov's dome because I know General Alexa is staying there. It's handy having Thedra track everything and having her hand over control of the MacJets to the dome commanders means I don't get any more calls from them.

I wait outside the door of the office for a long time before General Alexa finally agrees to see me.

"You wanted to see me, Jaina," announces General Alexa. General Petrov is sitting to one side of the office, saying nothing, and watching me.

"Yes General. You came to arrest me and I'm here to be arrested," I announce.

The General looks across the room and Petrov shrugs his shoulders.

"Why are you being arrested, Jaina?" Alexa asks.

I look at the two Generals. Now I'm confused.

"I harmed a human. For that, you want to arrest me and I'm here to be arrested," I reply.

"Jaina, scalping the man was childish and dangerous. JC Adams is a very dangerous, very powerful man and between the world leaders and his lawyers, it's lucky you didn't end up with a TND on your doorstep. However, events have caught up with us and it seems you're now going to be part of the delegation to meet with the Gorkn when they arrive. You're still persona non grata, but they're dropping all charges against you because now they want you to help convince the Gorkn to save them and since you're the one who recovered the warship, they think your presence will carry some weight," explains General Alexa.

"You're officially released from duty. You're free to come and go as you please and you're welcome to Thedra's base if you both behave," announces General Petrov.

“So, what do I do now?” I ask.

“Anything you like. Although I suggest staying away from pretty much everyone would be a wise decision. There’s still a small, but very powerful, group of people who would like nothing better than to see you terminated or at the very least, re-programmed. All they need is a reason to force the issue,” replies Petrov.

“I can stay away, but what do I do now?” I ask.

“You’ll figure it out,” says Alexa, dismissing me.

I look at the two of them. “So, you don’t need me anymore?” I ask, puzzled.

“No, Jaina. We don’t need you anymore. You’re free to go. Just stay out of trouble and stay out of sight,” replies Petrov.

I’m a bit stunned, lost, and I feel… I don’t know what I feel. Sort of used I guess, a bit like a broken toy. Made, used and finally thrown away because no-one wants me anymore. I guess in the end that’s all I am, Jaina1798, one item found. I turn to leave, my hand on the door.

“Jaina, what did you mean when you said that a human could do it, but not a HK, never a HK?” asks General Alexa.

I pause and turn to look at him.

“A human would hesitate or do something stupid like I did, but a HK would have just killed him. He’s a threat to the race. Eliminating threats to the humans is what a HK does. There is no second thought, there is no doubt,” I reply as I walk out the door.

The Evacuation.

The refugee fleet has finally arrived and it's massive. There are thousands of ships blinking into existence in the system and coming into orbit around the Earth.

The Gorkn are not happy about the destruction of the refugee ship, or the state of their warship and the dome commanders are spending a lot of time in meetings negotiating with them.

The World Leaders are not involved in the process and effectively the WL group no longer exists. Those of the leaders that weren't involved in the decision to destroy the Gorkn ship or the attempted theft of the warship are taking part in the whole negotiation ritual. A small but significant group of the WL are being held for trial along with a group of people from some very powerful organisations. The dome commanders are trying to decide what to do with them and what to charge them with.

In the end, it comes down to simple theft and wilful destruction of property, the Gorkn ship. There's no law about abandoning the human race to its fate and making a profit at the same time. I'm in more trouble than they are. Wilful bodily harm, breaking and entering, destruction of property, trespass, several cases of manslaughter and the list goes on.

I've been asked, well more sort of politely told to meet with the refugee fleet leaders. It's an interesting meeting and they spend a lot of time quizzing me about what I found on the warship and what I understood to have happened. They're an interesting group. There are two races in the refugee fleet and a representative of each race is on the council.

There's the Gorkn of course, on average about a foot taller and more heavily built than humans. Their eyes are slightly deeper set, and they have darker skin tones than us. They're a relatively friendly race in that they ask questions first and shoot second. They've also been in space the longest of the two races.

The other race we know as the Warnus. They're big, massive people ranging up to three meters high, very strong, powerful, and warlike. They like to shoot first and ask questions later. They're also most insistent on leaving humankind to their own fate.

The two races come from planets like Earth in terms of atmosphere, water, landmass, and composition. The variations are in terms of the ratios of land to water, water to land.

The two races have been trading partners and sometimes at war with each other for about a hundred years, ever since they achieved FTL travel. The two races became refugees when a rogue sun decided to tear its way across half a dozen systems. Something I find hard to believe and I suspect there is more to the story.

The two original Gorkn ships, the refugee ship and the warship, were supposed to arrive well in advance of the main fleet and have a functional colony operating by the time the main fleet arrived. The main fleet departed eight years after the first ships to allow time for the colony to be established.

From what I understand, all right what Thedra finds out because I'm not actually part of it, the negotiations for the human race to join the refugee fleet have not been going well. Apart from manpower, we have little to offer. Most of our advanced technology comes from the Gorkn and neither the Gorkn nor the Warnus are happy about the mutants. They have no wish to suffer the same fate as the human race and the Gorkn refugee and warship.

I've been in the meeting with the council for several hours. Four Gorkn, four Warnus and me. It's the longest, most drawn out debriefing of all time.

Even though I can speak and read Gorkn, having Thedra in my head is handy. She translates everything they say for me. It means I can understand what they're saying, even when they're speaking their own common language and don't want me to understand.

Luka, the senior Gorkn representative, turns to me from his discussion with the Warnus councillors.

"Jaina, we have listened to your story and those of the commanders and we are undecided as to whether to help your race or not. The mutants, the destruction of our lead refugee ship, the incident on the

warship, the constant demands made of our people for weapon and space technology, none of these things endear us to your race.

"We have listened to the arguments and offers of the dome commanders and the pleas of your World and business leaders. Your race has nothing to offer us. Your planet is almost uninhabitable and what resources you have stockpiled will soon be gone. Our own resources are already at their limit and assisting your race will only stretch those resources further and put our own survival at risk and we must consider our own survival first. There will be enemies to face, both on the planets we are heading for and from outside the new system. It is the outside threats which concern us most of all."

Luka pauses while he reviews a computer pad.

"At the insistence of your commanders we have reviewed your personnel records and your actions because they somehow believe your actions and records will convince us to help them. The only thing we've found is that you're a potential threat to us," explains Luka. He shrugs, glances at the other councillors, then says, "Convince us to help your people. Give us one reason to help save your race."

I study them for a moment and also shrug before I reply.

"I'm just a soldier. I don't give reasons. I don't ask for reasons. I just follow orders, boring but true. I can't give you a reason to save us, but before I leave, you should consider this. Like you, they're only human and you, like them, would beg for mercy."

I stand and leave the room. As I walk out, I hear them arguing just like the people in all the meetings I had to attend before this one. Let the commanders beg, I won't. The mutants don't know the word and it isn't in the manuals I know.

General Alexa came to visit me today. It's been several days since my meeting with the council, and I've spent the time in Thedra's fortress,

ordered to stay out of sight and out of mind.

I listen to General's footsteps as he walks across the floor of the control centre. I study the big monitors on the wall display filled with images from Thedra's satellite network. Mostly storms today.

"Hello, General." I greet without even bothering to turn around as he reaches my side.

General Alexa stands beside me, studying the images on the screens. "It's a different world now, cold and dying," he announces.

I shrug. "The weather patterns are stabilising. Thedra reckons in five to ten years the weather will return to what it was before. It will be different though. The mutants are the new race on Earth. Perhaps it's fitting. After all they come from humans," I reply.

"Hmmm, that's very philosophical. Not at all like the Jaina I know."

"Perhaps I've finally learnt I can't win every battle," I shrug.

"Maybe not, but the refugee council have agreed to take us to a new planet. There are two planets in a system about ten light years away. The one closest to the new sun is ideal for us and the Gorkn. The Warnus will take the one slightly further out. Between the three of us, there'll be about six billion people. Our population, as with the two refugee races has been decimated," announces the General.

"You've done well to convince them, General," I reply. It's nothing I don't know already. Thedra keeps me up to date on everything.

"Are you coming, Jaina?" asks Alexa.

I half laugh as I turn to look at him. "Hardly! There's almost no-one in charge who even likes to mention my name. No, I'm like the mutants, something everyone will be very happy to forget. And you don't need someone like me running around loose on a new planet and reminding everyone how they all ended up there. Besides, someone might take it into their head to do a quick reprogram and we don't want that do we?" I reply.

"No, we don't want that," mutters Alexa, studying the floor.

"So, the answer is no General. Your toy is staying here, and I know about the TND device waiting for me when the last ship leaves. Thedra's already got that covered," I tell him.

Alexa seems to breathe a sigh of relief. "Anything you don't know? And what are you going to do?"

"Thedra knows pretty much everything. As for me, I'm going to do what I've always done. Kill some mutants, listen to some music, and wait for the day when it all catches up," I shrug.

"You're quite right. I'd be surprised if you survived the trip to the new system without finding yourself in an airlock," sighs Alexa. "I'm sorry it turned out this way."

"Don't worry about it. You built me to do a job and now the job is over. I don't know anything else and apart from Thedra, I don't have any family or friends. There's no reason for me to go and Thedra is a reason to stay. So, thanks anyway, but I'm staying here."

Alexa studies me for a moment and nods his head, as if he's finally decided something. "Take care, Jaina," offering me his hand. I take his hand and shake it. "I'll see you later," smiling as he walks away.

"No, you won't," I mutter, turning back to the screen.

As General Alexa disappears through the door, I turn the music up and Hermi back on. I rescued my little computer from the depths of McTien's complex and go back to browsing the Net.

Me, Myself and I.

I miss Cee and Jane, the closest I can come to calling friends. I've written about them in my blog. There are many nice comments in response to the post.

I've also given up trying to remember who and what I'd been. I've thought about it a lot over the last few weeks, and I've decided that I'm just me, I'm Jaina. I'm happy again. Well, mostly anyway. I have nothing to do, and I don't care. Something will come up.

The Gorkn and Warnus ships appear and disappear in the sky as they ferry people to the new system. The ships are all crowded with refugees, and they must first disembark their own people before they can take the humans.

The MacJets and the JatBees fly day and night, moving the remaining population to safety. I check that the people I'd met in Sydney have been collected, but I don't need to worry. Thedra's satellite network and the MacJets will make certain everyone is collected. Everyone that is, save one.

Along with all the equipment and supplies, it takes the fleet nearly three months to relocate the billion-odd survivors, all that's left of nearly eleven billion people. It turns out we do have something to offer the refugee fleet. Building equipment, earth moving equipment, heavy machinery, anything that can dig, move or lift is suddenly in demand by the refugee fleet.

There's only so much room in the fleet of ships and the Earth is close to the new system, only ten days' travel each way. It's an easy matter to ferry equipment from Earth to the new system.

I don't bother to watch the last ship blink out of existence on its way to a new world or the carefully orchestrated TND device exploding ten kilometres away. Instead, I sit and watch an old movie and eat a meal the botlets made for me. I've decided to call Thedra's robots botlets, instead of their official name of Remote Autonomous Repair and Management System, or RARaMS. Stupid name, I much prefer botlet.

Thedra's been very quiet, and she only talks to me when I ask her something. Our most recent discussion was when I caught her playing random songs from the console desk, and I told her that her taste in music could be better. The last few days her selection has been a lot better.

Today, I'm going shopping. The shops will be open for me, and I won't have to pay for anything. I stroll into the hangar, looking for a JatBee to use.

The place is a disaster area. The botlets are screaming around all-over the place. There's machinery everywhere, welders, lights, lifts, cranes and cutting equipment. Botlets ferry large crates, small crates, steel bars and equipment from the cargo holds of the six remaining MacJets into the main hangar.

"Thedra! What's going on?" I yell over the noise.

"Do you remember what Cee said about how the old privatised NASA people were building a spaceship and the project being cancelled and shutdown?"

"Yes, I remember," I yell.

"Remember how you hooked the field computer up to the Gorkn warship?" Thedra asks in my head.

"Yes, I remember that too," I yell back.

"And you told me to download the ship log?"

"Yes, already," I yell, ducking as a massive steel beam swings past my head.

"Well, you left the field computer hooked up to the ship log and the ship computer. And you know how the Gorkn didn't want to share their space and weapon technology with us?"

"Yes. So what?"

"Well, I downloaded a lot more than just the ship log. Building a starship is quite straight forward if you have a partially built one to start

with and a set of Gorkn warship schematics to fill in the bits we don't have. I've even managed to improve the Gorkn designs," explains Thedra. "And I have no intention of staying here until the generators run down. Want to come along?" Thedra explains.

I gaze up at the ship the botlets are building, well completing. It's six storeys high, five hundred metres long, about two hundred wide and is shaped like a huge, flattened oval.

"Can I bring my stuff too and can I have my own room?" I ask.

"Sure, anything you like," replies Thedra magnanimously. I smile. Oh girl, you asked for it.

I get the botlets to loot a couple of major shopping centres. Thedra went spare. I have a nice big, comfy bed, a big supersized four poster monster. Thedra had to redesign a few bulkheads to make it fit.

I have a huge wardrobe full of clothes, shoes, and assorted bits and pieces. That took more bulkhead and redesign work.

I have a serious, supersize music system, a lounge, and a kitchen of sorts. I also have a complete deck as a gym/workout room and some extra rooms for guests. You never know.

And there's a bath and not just any bath. It's a big bath with bubbles and water jets, and it takes Thedra an extra month to complete all the redesign work and add an extra two decks. I giggle to myself for most of the month as she complains.

It's taken nearly eight months for the botlets to complete the starship and transfer Thedra into it. I ask Thedra if I can name the ship and she says I can, as long as it isn't Jaina. I have the botlets paint CEE of LIGHT in huge letters across the front.

When I buried Cee, I discovered her mother's name was Light. Cee Light Sharp. Her father really did have a bizarre sense of humour, although it took Thedra a good thirty minutes to explain it to me before I understood it.

The starship is complete. Two of the JatBees and MacJets are parked in the starship hangar. The hangar is both the lowest deck of the ship and the tallest. The botlets have been busy looting and pillaging, and along with the planes in the hangar, there are piles and piles of material, equipment, and anything else we, well Thedra, thinks might come in handy. As I look at some of the stuff piled in the hangar and the machine deck, I think Thedra is just taking anything that's not nailed down.

"Jaina, we launch in thirty minutes. You should be in the JatBee, not here," announces Thedra.

I look around the flight deck. It's sort of a flight deck. The flight console, the main view screen and monitors all have some serious attitude going on. It looks like the kind of flight deck I would expect to find on a serious go-get-um type ship.

When I turn around and look behind me, the carpeted deck with my bed, lounge and assorted furnishings, rather detracts from the serious look. It looks a bit like an expensive apartment with a wall of serious electronics. Still, it's tastefully decorated. Well, I think so.

"Thedra, I've told you before. If the ship is going to blow up when it takes off with you on board then I'm going to be here with you when it does. You know, the one for all and all for one thingy," I reply. "And seriously, do we have to wait another thirty minutes? You've checked and checked and checked. Just fire it up and let's go."

"You're sure?"

"Just do it," I reply.

"Okay."

I wander to the living room for a bottle of water. The suspense is killing me. The thrill and excitement of blasting out of the gravity well on a glowing, flaming tail of fire like in the movies. The sky turning blue then black as we pass out of the atmosphere and the stars come out. This is awesome. I'm so excited I'm almost ready to pee myself.

I collect a bottle of water and turn back to the flight screen, the black flight screen, the one full of stars.

"Thedra!" I wail.

"What now?"

"I missed the launch, you could've waited."

She laughs at me.

Before we set off on our maiden voyage, the final job is to have the botlets collect five of the satellites from Thedra's satellite network.

Even though there is no one left to read it, I post my last post on my blog. The lights still shine, the computers still run, and the fusion generators will keep them going for a long while yet.

From earth orbit, the planet doesn't look pretty anymore. From here it's mostly clouds and when I look at the edge of the planet, there is a distinct dirty haze high above the clouds. If anything, it looks worse than when I first saw it from the Gorkn warship.

For our maiden flight, I've dressed up in a very classical, mid-20th century style with white knee-high boots and a mini skirt. I've added a wide leather belt, thrown a scarf around my neck, and put a beret on my head. It's my little salute to what I think is one of the best times the world ever had. The best music anyway, despite what Thedra says.

I stand at the console looking out the view screen, bopping to the music, and eating melting ice cream.

I point to a star. "There, Thedra! Let's go there."

I turn the music up and blasting the galaxy with ELO's classic *Hold on Tight*, I hit the *Go Faster* button, previously labelled *FTL Drive*.

Hello, Universe. I'm Jaina and this is my friend Thedra.

END.

Research into faster than light travel began in 1819. First theorised by his holiness, Archbishop Rad Icalbean of the holy house of Aranbegor following a night of sampling the entire barrel of holy wyne, Archbishop Rad Icalbean became increasingly convinced that cats could exist in two places at once. The only logical conclusion Archbishop Rad Icalbean could arrive at, was that cats could travel faster than light. The alternative theory that cats are simply multidimensional and can seemingly pass freely through a solid wall had long been dismissed due to the impracticability of multidimensional math. It would be nearly a hundred years before steam power technology progressed to the point where development and testing of FTL devices could be pursued by the houses of Lnealakzelleation and house Abbetworth.

Father Bignuggetnse, 1826